PDC 58706

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

AUGUST 75c • UK 30p.

ISAAC ASIMOV
Constant As The Northern Star

Peregrine: Alflandia
a new novelet by
AVRAM DAVIDSON

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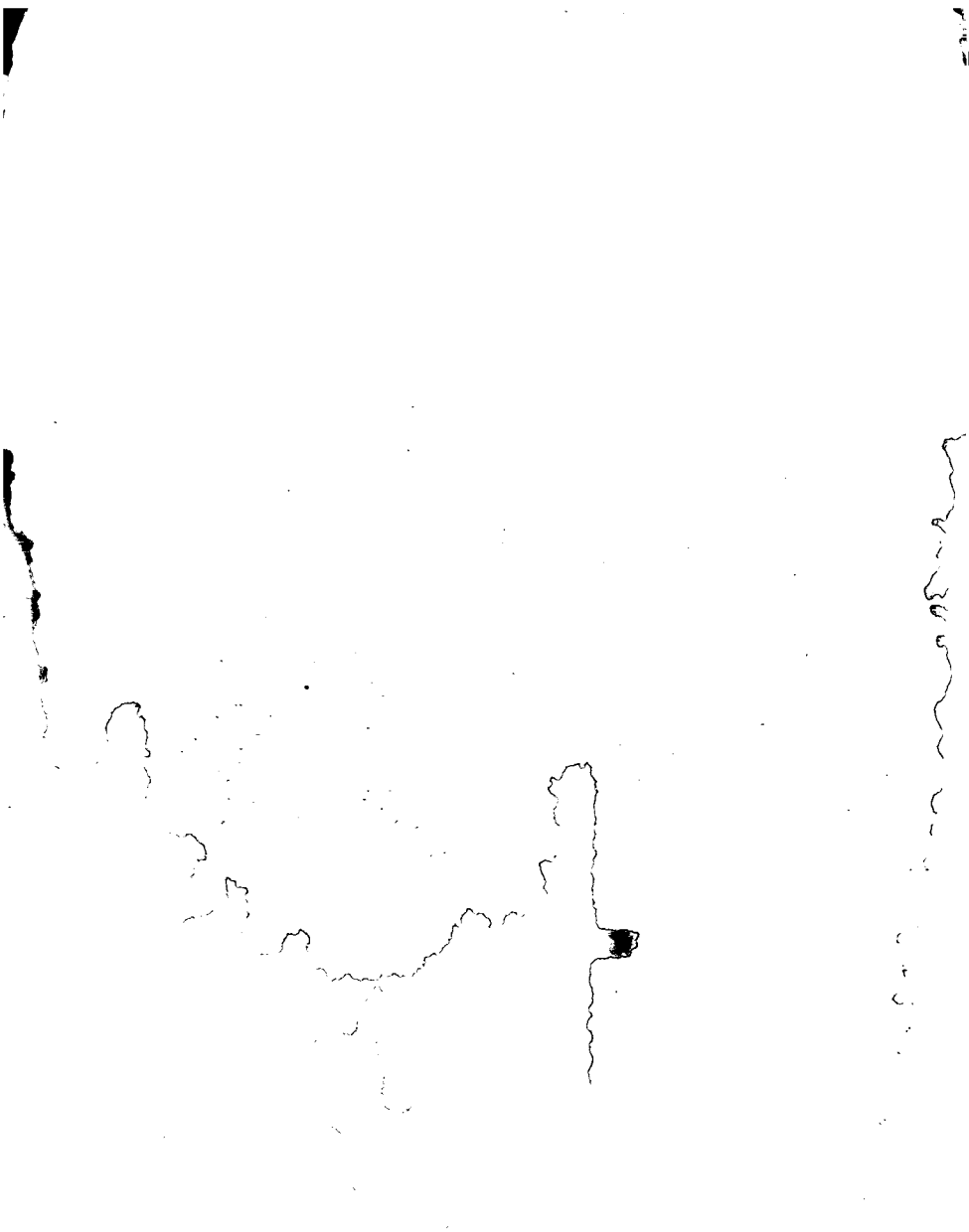

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

Including Venture Science Fiction
AUGUST • 24th YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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RESS CATALOG CARD NO: 51-25682

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 45, No. 2, Whole No. 267, Aug. 1973. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc., at $.75 per copy. Annual subscription $8.50; $9.00 in Canada and Mexico, $9.50 in other foreign countries. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Editorial submissions should be sent to 347 East 53rd St., New York, N.Y. 10022. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
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The first part of the Chronicles of Peregrine the son of Paladrine, the Sovereign of Sapodilla ("the last pagan king in lower Europe") was reported by Avram Davidson in *Peregrine: Primus* (Walker, 1971). This story, which starts him off among the mixed multitude of Celts, Latins, Teutons, Authochthenes, and what-have-yous of the long-lost land of East Brythonia, although complete in itself, also will form part one of *Peregrine: Secundus.*

Peregrine: Alflandia

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

The King of the Alves was taking his evening rest and leisure after a typical hard day's work ferreting in the woods behind the donjeon-keep, which — in Alfland — was a goodish distance from the Big House. It was usual, of course, for the donjeon-keep to be kept as part and parcel of the Big House, but the Queen of Alfland had objected to the smell.

"It's them drains, me dear," her lord had pointed out to her more than once when she made these objections. "The High King isn't due to make a Visitation this way for another half-a-luster, as well you know. And also as well you know what'd likely happen to me if I was to infringe upon the High Royal Monopoly and do my own plumbing on them drains, a mere pettiking like me."

"I'd drains him, if I was a man," said the Queen of Alfland. "*And* the prices as he charges, too! 'Tisn't as if he was contented with three peppercorns and a stewed owl in a silver tassy, like his father before him; ah! *there* was a High King for you! Well, well, I see it can't be helped, having wedded a mouse instead of a proper man; well, then *move* the wretched donjeon-keep, it doesn't pay for itself no-how, and if it wasn't as our position requires we have one, blessed if I'd put up with it."

So the donjeon-keep had been laboriously taken down and laboriously removed and laboriously set up again just this side of the woods; and there, of a very late afternoon, the King of the Alves sat on a hummock with his guest, the King of Bertland. Several long grey ears protruded from a sack at their feet, and now and then a red-eyed ferret

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poked his snouzel out of a royal pocket and was gently poked back in. The Master of the Buckhounds sat a short ways aways, a teen-age boy who was picking the remnants of a scab off one leg and meditatively crunching the pieces between his teeth. He was Alfland's son and heir; there were of course not really any buckhounds.

"Well, Alf, you hasn't done too bad today," the royal guest observed after a while.

"No, I hasn't, Bert, and that's a fact. Stew for the morrow, and one day at a time is all any man dare look for to attend to and haccomplish, way *I* look at it." The day was getting set to depart in a sort of silver-gilt haze, throstles were singing *twit-twit-thrush,* and swallows were flitting back and forth pretending they were bats. The Master of the Buckhounds arose.

"Hey, Da, is they any bread and cheese more?" he asked.

"No, they isn't, Buck. Happen thee'll get they dinner soon enough."

The Master of the Buckhounds said that he was going to see could he find some berries or a musk-room and sauntered off into the thicket. His sire nudged the guest. "Gone to play with himself, I'll be bound," said he.

"Why don't 'ee marry im off?" asked the King of Bertland, promptly. "There's our Rose, has her hope chest all filled and still as chaste as the day the wise woman slapped her newborn bottom, ten year ago last Saturnalia, eh?"

The King of the Alves grunted moodily. "Hasn't I sudggestered this to his dam?" he asked, rhetorically. "'Here's Bert come for to marry off his datter,' says I, 'for thee doesn't think there's such a shortage o' rabbiting in Bertland he have to come here for it, whatever the formalities of it may be. And Princess Rose be of full age and can give thee a hand in the kitching,' says I. But, no, says she. For why? Buck haven't gone on no quest nor haven't served no squire time at the High King's court and ten-year-old is too old-fashioned young and he be but a boy hisself and she don't need no hand in the kitching and if I doesn't like the way me victuals be served, well, I can go and eat beans with the thralls, says she.

"— Well, do she natter that Buck have pimples, twill serve she right, say I. Best be getten back. Ar, these damp edgerows will give me the rheum in me ips, so we sit ere more, eh?"

He hefted his sack of hares and they started back. The King of Bertland gestured to the donjeon-keep, where a thin smoke indicated the warder was cooking his evening gruel. "As yer ransomed off King

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Baldwin's heir as got tooken in the humane man-trap last winter what time e sought to unt the tusky boar?"

The walls of Alftown came into sight, with the same *three breeches and a rent* which characterized the walls of every castle and capital town as insisted on by Wilfredoric Conqueror, the late great-uncle of the last High King but one. Since that time, Alfish (or Alvish, as some had it) royalty had been a-dwelling in a Big House, which was contained behind a stout stockade: this, too, was customary.

"What, didn't I notify you about that, Bert?" the Alf-king asked, with a slightly elaborate air of surprise. "Ah, many's the good joke and jest we've had about that in the fambly, *'Da has tooken King Baldy's hair, harharharhar!'* Yus, the old man finally paid up, three mimworms and a dragon's egg. *'Mustn't call him King Baldy now he's got his heir back, horhor-horhor!'* Ah, what's life wiffart larfter? Or, looking hat it another way, wiffart *h*honor: we was meaning to surprise you, Bert, afore you left, by putten them mimworms and that dragon's hegg hinto a suitable container wif a nice red ribbon and say, 'Ere you be, King o' Bertland, hand be pleased to haccept this as your winnings for that time we played forfeits last time we played it.' Surprise yer, yer see. But now yer've spoiled that helement of it; ah, well, must take the bitter wiv the sweet."

That night after dinner the three mimworms and the dragon's egg were lifted out from the royal hidey-hole and displayed for the last time at Alf High-Table before being taken off to their new home. Princess Pearl and Princess Ruby gave over their broidered-work, and young Buck (he was officially Prince Rufus but was never so-called) stopped feeding scruffles to his bird and dog — a rather mangy-looking mongrel with clipped claws — and Queen Clara came back out of the kitchen.

"Well, this is my last chance, I expect," said Princess Pearl, a stout good-humored young girl, with rather large feet. "Da, give us they ring."

"Ar, this time, our Pearl, happen thee'll have luck," her sire said, indulgently; and he took off his finger the Great Sigil-Stone Signet-Ring of the Realm, which he occasionally affixed to dog licenses and the minutes of the local wardmotes, and handed it to her. Whilest the elders chuckled indulgently and her brother snorted and her baby sister looked on with considerable envy, the elder princess began to make the first mystic sign — and then, breaking off, said, "Well, now, and since it *is* the last chance, do thee do it for me,

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our Ruby, as I've ad no luck a-doin it for meself so far—"

Princess Ruby clapped her hands. "Oh, *may* I do it, oh, please, please, our Pearl? Oh, you are *good* to me! Ta ever so!" and she began the ancient game with her cheeks glowing with delight and expectation:

Mimworm dim, mimworm bright,
Make the wish I wish tonight:
By dragon egg and royal king,
Send now for spouse the son of a king!

The childish voice and gruff chuckles were suddenly all drowned out by screams, shouts, cries of astonishment, and young Buck's anguished wail; for where his bird had been, safely jessed, there suddenly appeared a young man as naked as the day of his birth.

Fortunately the table had already been cleared, and, nakedness not ever having been as fashionable in East Brythonia (the largest island in the Black Sea) as it had been in parts farther south and west, the young man was soon rendered as decent as the second-best tablecloth could make him.

"Our Pearl's husband! Our Pearl's husband! See, I *did* do it right, *look!* Our Mum and our Da, *look!*" and Princess Ruby clapped her hands together. King Alf and King Bert sat staring and muttering...perhaps charms, or countercharms...Buck, with tears in his eyes, demanded his bird back, but without much in his tone to indicate that he held high hopes...Princess Pearl had turned and remained a bright, bright red...and Queen Clara stood with her hands on her hips and her lips pressed together and a face — as her younger daughter put it later: "O Lor! Wasn't Mum's face a study!"

Study or no, Queen Clara said now, "Well, and pleased to meet this young man, I'm sure, but it seems to me there's more to this than meets the heye. Our Pearl is still young for all she's growed hup into a fine young 'oman, and I don't know as I'm all that keen on her marrying someone as we knows nuffink abahrt, hexcept that he use ter be a bird; look at that there Ellen of Troy whose dad was a swan, Leda was er mum's name; what sort of ome life d'you think she could of ad, no better than they should be the two of them, mother and daughter — what! Alfland! Yer as some'at to say, as yer!" she turned fiercely on her king, who had indeed been mumbling something about live and let live, and it takes all kinds, and seems a gormly young man; "Ah, and if another Trojan War is ter start, needn't think to take Buck halong and —"

But she had gone too far.

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"Nah then, nah then, Queen Clara," said her king. "Seems to me yer've gotten things fair muddled, that 'ere Trojing War come abaht acause the lady herself ad more nor one usband, an' our Pearl asn't — leastways not as *I* knows of. First yer didn't want Buck to get married, nah yer wants our Pearl ter stay at ome. I dessay, when it come our Ruby's time, yer'll ave some'at to say bout that, too. Jer want me line, the royal line-age o'the Kings of Alfland, as as come down from King Deucalion's days, ter die aht halter-gether?" And to this the queen had no word to utter, or, at least, none she thought it prudent to; so her husband turned to the young man clad in the second-best tablecloth (the best, of course, always being saved for the lustral Visitations of the High King himself) — and rather well did he look in it, too — and said, "Sir, we bids yer welcome to this ere Igh Table, which it's mine, King Earwig of Alfland is me style and title, not but what I mightn't ave another, nottersay other *ones,* if so be I ad me entitles and me right. Ah, ad not the King o' the Norf, Arald Ardnose, slain Earl Oscaric the Ostrogoth at Slowstings, thus allowing Juke Wilfred of Southmandy to hobtain more than a mere foot'old, as yer might call it, this ud be a united kingdom today instead of a mere patch'ork quilt of petty kingdomses. Give us an account of yerself, young man, as yer hobliged to do hanyway according to the lore."

And at once proceeded to spoil the effect of this strict summons by saying to his royal guest, "Pour us a drain o' malt and one for this young sprig, wonthcher, Bert," and handed the mug to the young sprig with his own hands and the words, "Ere's what made the deacon dance, so send it down the red road, brother, and settle the dust."

They watched the ale go rippling down the newcomer's throat, watched him smack his lips. Red glows danced upon the fire-pit hearth, now and then illuminating the path of the black smoke all the way up to the pitchy rafters where generations of other smokes had left their soots and stains. And then, just as they were wondering whether the young man had a tongue or whether he peradventure spoke another than the one in which he had been addressed, he opened his comely red lips and spoke.

"Your Royal Grace and Highnesses," he said, "and Prince and Princesses, greetings."

"Greetings," they all said, in unison, including, to her own pleased surprise, Queen Clara, who even removed her hands from under the apron embroidered with

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the golden crowns, where she had been clasping them tightly, and sat down, saying that the young man spoke real well and was easily seen to have been well brought hup, whatsoever e ad been a bird: but there, we can't always elp what do befall us in this vale of tears.

"To give an account of myself," the young man went on, after no more than a slight pause, "would be well lengthy, if complete. Perhaps it might suffice for now for me to say that as I was on the road running north and east out of Chiringirium in the Middle, or Central, Roman Empire, I was by means of a spell cast by a benevolent sorcerer, transformed into a falcon in order that I might be saved from a much worse fate; that wilst in the form of that same bird I was taken in a snare and manned by one trained in that art, by him sold or exchanged for three whippets and a brace of woodcock to a trader out of Tartary by way of the Crimea; and by *him* disposed of to a wandering merchant, who in turn made me over to this young prince here for two silver pennies and a great piece of gammon. I must say that this is very good ale," he said, enthusiastically. "The Romans don't make good ale, you know, it's all wine with them. My old dadda used to tell me, 'Perry, my boy, clean barrels and good malt make clean good ale...'"

And, as he recalled the very tone of his father's voice and the very smell of his favorite old cloak, and realized that he would never see him more, a single tear rolled unbidden from the young man's eye and down the down of his cheek and was lost in the tangle of his soft young beard, though not lost to the observation of all present. Buck snuffled, Ruby climbed up in the young man's lap and placed her slender arms round his neck, Queen Clara blew her nose into her gold-embroidered apron, King Bert cleared his throat, and King Alf-Earwig brushed his own eyes with his sleeve.

"Your da told yer that, eh?" he said, after a moment. "Well, he told yer right and true — What, call him dadda, do 'ee? Why, yer must be one a them Lower Europeans, then, for I've eard it's their way o' speech. What's is name, then — and what's yours, for that matter?"

Princess Pearl, speaking for the first time since giving the ring to her small sister, said, "Why, Da, haven't he told us that? His name is Perry." And then she blushed an even brighter red than ever.

"Ah, he have, our Pearl. I'll be forgetting my own name next. Changed into a falcon-bird and then changed back again, eh? Mind them mimworms and that 'ere dragon hegg, Bert; keep em

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safe locked hup, for where there be magic there be mischief — But what's yer guvnor's name, young Perry?"

Young Perry had had time to think. Princess Pearl was to all appearances an honest young woman and no doubt skilled in the art of spindle and distaff and broider-sticking, as befitted the daughter of a petty king; and as befitted one, she was passing eager and ready for marriage to the son of another such. But Perry had no present mind to be that son. Elliptically he answered with another question. "Have you heard of Sapodilla?"

Brows were knit, heads were scratched. Elliptics is a game at which more than one can play. "That be where you're from, then?" replied King Alf.

The answer, such as it was, was reassuring. He felt he might safely reveal a bit more without revealing too much more. "My full name, then, is Peregrine the son of Paladrine, and I *am* from Sapodilla and it *is* in Lower Europe. And my father sent me to find my older brother, Austin, who looks like me, but blond." — This was stretching the truth but little. Eagerness rising in him at the thought, he asked, "Have any of you seen such a man?"

King Bert took the answer upon himself. "mayhap such a *bird* is what ee should better be a-hasking for, *horhorhor!*" he said. And then an enormous yawn lifted his equally enormous mustache.

Someone poked Perry in the side with a sharp stick. He did not exactly open his eyes and sit up, there on the heap of sheepskin and blanketure nigh the still hot heap of coals in the great hall; for somehow he knew that he was sleeping. This is often the prelude to awakening, but neither did he awake. He continued to lie there and to sleep, though aware of the poke and faintly wondering about it. And then it came again, and a bit more peremptory, and so he turned his mind's eye to it, and before his mind's eye he saw the form and figure of a man with a rather sharp face, and this one said to him, "Now, attend, and don't slumber off again, or I'll fetch you back, and perhaps a trifle less pleasantly; you are new to this island, and none come here new without my knowing it, and yet I did *not* know it. Attend, therefore, and explain."

And Peregrine heard himself saying, in a voice rather like the buzzing of bees (and he complimented himself, in his dream, for speaking thus, for it seemed to him at that time and in that state that this was the appropriate way for him to be speaking). "Well, and well do I now know that I have

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passed through either the Gate of Horn or the Gate of Ivory, but which one I know not, do you see?"

"None of that, now, that is not my concern: explain, explain, explain; what do you here and how came you here, to this place, called 'the largest island in the Black Sea,' though not truly an island...and, for that matter, perhaps not even truly in the Black Sea... Explain. Last summons."

Perry sensed that no more prevarications were in order. "I came here, then, sir, in the form of an hawk or falcon, to which state I was reduced by white witchery; and by white witchery was I restored to own my natural manhood after arriving."

The sharp eyes scanned him. The sharp mouth pursed itself in more than mere words. "Well explained, and honestly. So. I have more to do, and many cares, and I think you need not be one of them. For now I shall leave you, but know that from time to time I shall check and attend to your presence and your movements and your doings. *Sleep!*"

Again the stick touched him, but now it was more like a caress, and the rough, stiff fleece and harsh blankets felt as smooth to his naked skin as silks and downs.

He awoke again, and properly this time, to see the grey dawnlight touched with pink. A thrall was blowing lustily upon the ember with a hollowed tube of wood and laying fresh fagots of wood upon it. An even lustier rumble of snores came from the adjacent heap of covers, whence protruded a pair of hairy feet belonging, presumably, to the King of Bertland. And crouching by his own side was Buck.

Who said, "Hi."

"Hi," said Perry, sitting up.

"You used to be a peregrine falcon and now you're a peregrine man?" the younger boy asked.

"Yes. But don't forget that I was a peregrine man before becoming a falcon. And let me thank you for the care and affection which you gave me when I was your hawk, Buck. I will try to replace myself...or replace the bird you've lost, but as I don't know just when I can or how, even, best I make no promise."

At this point the day got officially underway at Alfland Big House, and there entered the king himself, followed by the Lord High Great Steward, aged eight (who, having ignominiously failed his apprenticeship as kitchenboy by forgetting to turn the spit and allowing a pair of pullets to burn, had been demoted), carrying hot water and towels; the soft-soap, in a battered silver basin, being born by King Alf. He also bore an ostrich feather which had seen better days, and with this he ceremoniously

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tickled the feet of King Bert, whose snores ceased abruptly. The hot water and towels were set on a bench and the burnished tray set up in a convenient niche to serve as mirror. King Bert grunted greetings, took his sickle-shaped razor out of his ditty bag, and, seizing one wing of his mustache and pulling the adjacent skin out, began to shave.

"Buck," said King of the Alves, "yer mum wants yer. Nar then, young Perry," he said, "what I wants ter know is this: Haccording to the charm as our Ruby's been and done unto yer, yer supposed to be the son of a king. Sometimes magic gets muddled, has we all knows, take for hinstance that time the Conqueror e says to iz wizard, 'Conjur me up the ghost of Caesar,' not specifying *which* Caesar e meant but hassuming e'd ave great Caesar's ghost hand no hother, which e adn't; the resultant confusion we needn't go hinter. *How*ever. *'Bring now for spouse the son of a king,'* says the charm, doesn't say *which* king, do it, but meantersay: His you hor hisn't you, a fair question, lad, give us a fair hanswer."

This Peregrine felt the man was entitled to, but he was by no means delighted with the implications. "In a manner of speaking, Sir King," he said, wiggling slightly — and then, reflecting that the truth is more often the best than not, he added, "I am my father's youngest bastard son, and he has three heirs male of his body lawfully begotten."

King Alf digested this. It could almost be seen going down. "Well, then, we can homit *Prince* Peregrine, can we. Mmmm. Which means, *Queen* Pearl, we needn't look forrert to that, neither. Er dowery ud be smaller, there's a saving, right there. Nor she needn't move far away, Lower Europe, meantersay, might's well be Numdia for all the chance us'd ever get to visit. As a one or two by-blows meself. Fust one, wasn't never sure was it by me or was it by a peddler as'd been by awking plaice; lad turned fifteen, stole a fishing smack one night and run wif it: I crossed is name horf the Royal Genealogical Chart hand ad a scribe write *Denounciated hand Renounciated* hafter it. Tother un was the spit and image of me Huncle Percy, long afore deceased; but this lad went to the bad just like tother one, hexcept e become a physician specializing in the infirmities of women, as yer might say, ope yer own da as ad better luck..."

His voice ended in a mumble, then plucked up again. "Now, no doubt yer da has enobled you, give yer some such title as it might be, say, Count of Cumtwaddle and Lord of the Three Creeks in the

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peerage of Sapodilla, hey?" he inquired, hopefully.

Peregrine sighed, shook his sleek head, informed the host-king that what his father had given him was his blessing, a month's rations, three mules, a suit of the best second-rate armor, and a few other similar items; plus the ritual warning, established by law, that it would be Death for him to return either armed or at the head of an armed multitude.

King Alf grunted. "Well," he said, tone halfway between disappointment and approbation, "spose that's one way to preserve the loreful succession, makes sense, too bad, well, well," he shook his head. The gesture seemed to indicate bafflement rather than a negative decision. Another grunt announced a fresh idea...or two.

"Well, be that as it may, Queen Clara sends her good wishes and says please to excuse as she needs back the tablecloth. Now, we can't ave yer traipsing round in yer bare minimum, for folk ud larf hat us ha-keeping hup them hold-fashioned Grecian himfluences. So." He displayed an armful of garments. "One o' these is what's left o' what I've grew out of, but maybe it be still too large. And tother is for Buck ter grow into, maybe it be still too small. Only way to find out is to dive and try."

Perry thanked him, dived and tried. The pair of trews, woven in a tessellated pattern according to the old Celtish style, and intended for Buck to grow into, fit him well enough; but the tunic was a bit tight across the chest and shoulders; the tunic which Buck's father had grown out of, though an outsize round the waste, had exactly Perry's sleeve length. The same lucky fit obtained with the sandals, formerly the property of King Baldy's heir. "And here," said the royal host, setting down a casket inlaid in ivory, "is the gear box, and you may poke around for clasps, buckles, fibulae, and such; please elp yerself. No urry, hexcept that betwixt dawn and noon we as a rightchual ceremony to hattend; like ter ave yer wiff us."

The clepsydra at Alfland Big House had been for some time out of order, the king insisting with vigor that fixing it would constitute making plumbing repairs and thus an infringement on the High Royal Monopoly, the queen — for her part — insisting with equal vigor that the king was trying to cover up his ignorance of how to make the repairs. Be that as it may, the great water-clock remained unfixed, only now and then emitting a gurgle, a trickle, and a groan, rather like an elderly gentleman with kidney trouble. Be that as *that* may, at an hour approximately between dawn

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and noon, Peregrine, alerted by a minor clamor in the courtyard, made his way thither.

He saw gathered there the entire royal family and household, including thralls; the guest king, who had delayed his departure in order to witness the ritual ceremony; a number of citizens, whose abrupt discontinuance of conversation, and interested examination of Peregrine as he approached, gave him reason to believe they had been talking about him; and three archers, three slingers, and three spearmen: these last nine constituting the Army of the Realm (cavalry had been strictly forbidden by Wilfred the Conqueror).

"Ah, Peregrine the son of Paladrine the Soverereign of Sapodilla in Lower Europe," the King of the Alves announced, slightly pompously. And at once said, in his usual gruffly affable manner, "Come on over, Perry, and leave me hexplain to yer the nature of this hoccasion. See," he gestured, "that there is Thuh Treasure. Likewise, the Treasury."

"What, that single sack?" is the sentence which Perry had in mind to say, but, tactfully, did not.

King Alf continued, portentously, "Now, this is the third day hafter the full moon of the month of Hecatombaeon haccording to thuh hold Religion," he coughed delicately into his fist, "meantersay we're hall good Harians ere, and so naturally we've tried to git this fixed hup proper and right haccording to the New Faith, that is," another cough, "the True Faith. And ave wrote the bishops. Fergit ow many times we've wrote the bishops. First hoff, they hanswers, *'If any presbyter shall presume to ordain another presbyter, let him be anathema.'* Well, well, seems like sound enough doctrine and no skin hoff my, berumph! Caff caff. But what's it got to do wif dragons? Second time what they replied, *'Satan is the father of lies and the old dragon from the beginning; therefore let no presbyter presume to ordain another presbyter, and if he do presume, let him be anathema.'*" He cast an eye up and around the sky, for all the world like an augur about to take the auspices, then dropped his glance earthwise, and went on. "Next time we put the question, what's it as the bishops said, why they said, *'The waters of life may flow even through the jaws of a dead dog, but if any presbyter presume to ordain another presbyter —'*"

The gathering murmured, "— *'let him be anathema.'*"

King Alf then went on, briskly, to inform his younger guest that from time immemorial, on or about the hour midway between dawn

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and high noon on the third day after the full moon of the month of Hecatombaeon, a dragon was wont to descend upon the Land of the Alves for the purpose and with the intention of carrying off the treasure. *"Dragon?"* asked Perry, uneasily, "Then why is the treasure out in the open? And for that matter, why are *we* all out in the open?" The gathering chuckled.

"Why, bless yer, my boy," the king said, grinning broadly, "doesn't believe them old tales about dragons a-living on the flesh of young virgin females, does yer? Which you be'n't in any event, leastways I know you be'n't no female, a horhorhor! — No no, see, all them dragons in this zone and climate o' the world is pie-skiverous, see? Mayhap and peradventure there be carnivoreal dragons in the realms of the Boreal Pole; then agin, mayhap not. No skin hoff my — *O*wever. Yus. Well, once a year we aves this ceremonial rightchual. The dragon, which e's named Smarasderagd (meaning, Lover of Hemeraulds, in th' original Greek), the dragon comes and tries to carry orf the treasure. *One* story says, originally twas a golden fleece. Nowadays, has we no longer lives in thuh world of mye-thology, the treasure is the Treasury. All the taxes as as been collected under the terms of my vasselage and doomwit to the High King, and which I am bound to transmit to im — minus seven percent to cover handling expenses — dog licenses, plowhorse fee, ox-forge usage, chimbley tax, jus primus noctae commutations in fee simple, and all the rest of it; here he comes now, see im skim, thuh hold bugger!"

The crowd cheered, craned their necks, as did Peregrine; sure enough, there was a speck in the sky which rapidly increased in size. Peregrine asked, somewhat perplexed, "And does the dragon Smarasderagd transmit the treasury to the High King, or —"

King Alf roared, "What! Fancy such a notion! No no, lad. Old Smarry, e makes feint to nobble the brass, yer see, and we drives im orf, dontcher see. *I* as to do it hin order to maintain my fief, for, *'Watch and ward agayn Dragons and Gryphons,'* it be written in small print on the bottom of the paytent. And Old Smarry, *e* as to do it hin order to maintain *is* rights to hall the trash fish as gits caught in the nets, weirs, seines, wheels, traps and trots hereabouts. — As for gryphons, I don't believe in them things an nor I shan't, neither, hunless the bishops resolve as I must, hin Council Hassembled. — *Ere* e come!"

The spearmen began a rhythmical clashing of their shields.

"Ho serpentine and squamous gurt dragon Smarasderagd," the

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Alf-king began to chant, "be pleased to spare our treasure..."

With a sibilant sound and a strong smell of what Perry assumed was trash fish, the dragon spread his wings into a silent glide and replied, "I shan't, I shan't, so there and so there and so there..."

"Ho serpentine and squamous gurt dragon Smarasderagd — ullo, Smarry, ow's yer micturating membranes? — be pleased to spare..."

"I shan't, I shan't, I shan't — hello, Earwig, mustn't grumble, mustn't grumble — so there and so there and so there..."

Clash, clash, clash! went the spearmen. Peregrine observed that their spears had dummy heads.

"Then we'll drivé yer away with many wounds and assailments — what's the news, Smarry, is there any news? — assailments and torments..."

Swish, swishl, swish, swishl, Smarasderagd flapped his wings and circled low. "— That's for me to know and you to find out — My hide is impervious to your weapons, insquamous issue of Deucalion —" He dug his talons into the sack of treasure, and, on the instant, the spearmen hurled their spears and the slingers whirled their slings and the archers let loose their arrows. And seeing the arrows — which, being made of reeds, and unfletched — bounce harmlessly off Smarasderagd's tough integuments and observing the sling stones to be mere pea gravel, fit for affrighting pigeons, to say nothing of the mock-spears rattling as they ricocheted, Peregrine realized that the resistance was indeed a mere ritually ceremonial one. The dragon in sooth seemed to enjoy it very much, issuing steamy hisses much like giggles as he dug his talons into the sack of treasure and lifted it a space off the ground, while his bright glazey eyes flickered around from face to face and his huge wings beat the air.

Grinning, King Alf said, "Ere, ave a care now the way yer've got that sack eld, Smarry, or ye'll spill it. Don't want us to be a-picken of the Royal Hairlooms, ter say nuffink of the tax drachmae, up from this ere muck, do yer?"

"Perish the thought, Earwig," said Smarasderagd, shifting its grip, and flying higher.

The king's grin slipped a trifle. "Don't play the perishing fool, then," he said. "Settle it back down, smartly and gently."

"I shan't, I shan't, I shan't!"

"What, ave yer gotten dotty in yer old age? Set it back down at once directly, does yer ear?"

"Screw you, screw you, screw you!" And the dragon climbed a bit higher, whilst the king and his subjects looked at each other and at the dragon with a mixture of

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vexation and perplexity. "I'm not putting it down, I'm taking it with me, a-shish-shish-shish," Smarasderagd snickered steamily.

"But that's again the rules!" wailed the king.

"It *is* against the rules, isn't it?" the dragon agreed, brightly. "At least, it *was*. But. You know. I've reviewed the entire matter very carefully, and what does it all add up to? — To this? you get the treasure and I get the trash fish. So — as you *see*, Earwig — *I've changed the rules!*" he flew a bit higher. "*You* keep the trash fish! *I'll* keep the treasure!"

Buck, who was evidently much quicker than Peregrine had perhaps credited him for, gave a leap and a lunge for the bag of treasure; not only did he miss, but Smarasderagd, with a tittering hiss, climbed higher. Queen Clara, till now silent, tradition having provided no place for her in this pageant save that of spectator, wailed, "Do suthing, Alfland! E mustn't get to keep the treasure!"

"I shall, I shall, I shall!" sang out the dragon, and in a slow and majestic manner began to rise.

"Ere, now, Smarry," the king implored. "What! Cher going to destroy thur hamicable relations which as ithertofore hobtained atween hus for the sake o' this little bit o' treasure which is such in name honely?"

The dragon shrugged — a most interesting sight. "Well, you know how it is," he said. "Here a little, there a little, it all adds up." The king's cry of rage and outrage was almost drowned out by the noise of great rushing as the great wings beat and dragon and treasure alike went up — up — and away. It seemed to Peregrine that, between the sound of the king's wrath and the sound of the beating of the vast ribbed and membranous pinions, he could distinctly hear the dragon utter the words, "Ephtland — Alfland — which will be the next land —?"

Needless to say that it was not possible for him then to obtain of this impression either confirmation or refutation.

Having dismissed the Grand Army of Alfland (all nine members of it) and — in broken tones — informed the citizenry that they had his leave to go, King Earwig sat upon an overturned barrel in the middle of his courtyard and, alternately putting his head in his hands and taking it out again, groaned.

"Oh, the hairlooms as come down from King Deucalion's days! Oh, the tax moneys! (Buck, my boy, never trust no reptyle!) Oh... What will folk say of me?"

Queen Clara, her normal russet faded to a mere pale pink, had

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another question to ask, and she asked it. "What will the High King say?"

King Alf-Earwig groaned again. Then he said that he could tell her what the High King would say. "'Malfeasance, misfeasance, disfeasance, and nonfeasance h'of hoffice: horf wif is ead hon heach count!" — is what e'll say..."

The silence, broken only by the snuffling of Princess Pearl, was terminated by her mother. "Ah, and speaking of counts," said she, "what about my brother-in-law, Count Witenagamote?"

The king's head gave a half flop, and feeling it as though for reassurance, he muttered, "Ah, and I spose our only opes is ter seek refuge of im, for e lives hin a different jurisdiction, e does, and holds not of the High King; holds of the emperor, is what, the vassal of Caesar imself."

A touch of nature was supplied at this point by the cock of the yard, who not only ran a slightly frazzled hen to earth but began to tread her. Buck barely glanced, so serious was the other situation. Peregrine asked, automatically, "Which Caesar?"

He asked it of Alf's back, for the king had gotten up from the barrel and started pacing at length — a lengthy pace which was now leading him into the house by the back way. "Which Caesar?"

"Why, bless you," said the king, blankly, "of Caesar Haugustus, natcherly. What a question. Has though there were more nor one of im."

Peregrine, who knew very well that there was not only more than one but that the number of those using the title of *Caesar,* including heirs, co-heirs, sovereigns of the East and the West and the Center, claimants, pretenders, provincial governors and rather powerful lord mayors and mayors of the palace, ambitious army commanders — Peregrine, who knew it would be difficult at any given moment to calculate how many Caesars there were, also looked blank, but said nothing. He was clearly very far from Rome. From any Rome at all.

"Well, well, go we must as we must," muttered the King. "As we must go we must go. Meanwhile, o' course," he stopped suddenly, "can't be letting the Kingdom go wifourt authority; you, there," he beckoned to the kitchenboy. "How old are you?"

The lad considered, meanwhile wiping his snotty nose on his apron. "Six, last Mass of the Holy Martyrs of Macedonia, an it please Your Worship," he piped.

His Worship did some visible arithmetic. "Ah, that's good," he declared, after a moment. "Then ye'll not be seven for some munce after the High Kingly Inquisition

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gits ere to check hup...as they will, they will. — Below the hage of reason, they can't do a thing to yer, my boy, beside six smacks hand one to go on; so kneel. Hand let's ear yer name."

The boy knelt, rather slowly and carefully placing both palms on his buttocks, and slowly said, "Vercingetorix Rory Claudius Ulfilas John" — a name, which, if perhaps longer than he himself was, gave recognition to most of the cultures which had at one time or another entered East Brythonia within at least recorded history.

King Alf tapped him on each shoulder with the royal dirk without bothering to wipe off the fish scales (Queen Clara had been cleaning a carp for supper). "Harise, *Sir* Vercingetorix Rory Claudius Ulfilas John," he directed. "— Not all the way hup, aven't finished yet, down we go again. Heh-hem," he rolled his bulging and bloodshot blue eyes thoughtfully. "Sir Vercingetorix Rory Claudius Ulfilas John, we nominates and denominates yer as Regent *pro tem* of the Kingdoms and Demesnes of the Lands of the Alfs *in partibus infidelidum,* to have and to hold from this day forward until relieved by Is Royal Highness the High King — and don't eat all the raisins in the larder, or he'll have yer hide off yer bottom, hage of reason or no hage of reason. — And now," he looked about. "Ah, Bert. Yer've been so quiet, clean forgot yer was present. Ye'll witness this hact."

The King of Bertland, simultaneously stiff, uneasy, unhappy, said, "That I will, Alf."

Alf nodded. "*Hand* now," he said, "let's pack and hit the pike, then."

Peregrine had been considering. Amusing though it might be to tarry and observe how things go in Alfland under the regency of Sir Vercingetorix Rory Claudius Ulfilas John (aged six and some), still, he did not really consider it. And fond though he already was, though to be sure not precisely deeply fond — their aquaintance had been too brief — of the Alvish Royal House; yet he did not really feel that his destiny required him to share their exile; could he, even, feel he might depend upon the hospitality of Count Witenagamote? It might, in fact, be just the right moment to take his leave...before there was chance for anything more to develop in the way of taking for granted that he and Princess Pearl —

He was not very keen on dragons. Smarasderagd was a good deal larger than the last and only previous dragon he had ever seen. Piscivorous the former might or

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might not be; now that he no longer had all the trash fish to dine upon, who could say? Peregrine did not feel curious enough to wish to put it to the test. Dragons might lapse. King Alf's prolegomenal discourse, just before Smarasderagd had appeared, seemed to take for granted that the dragon was not a treasure-amassing dragon; yet all men in Lower Europe had taken it for granted that all dragons were by nature and definition just that. Peregrine remembered his first dragon, rather small it had been, and so — at first glance — had been the treasure it had been guarding. Yet a further investigation (after the dragon had been put to flight by the sprig of dragonbane from the geezle-sack of Appledore, the combination sorcerer, astrologer, court philosopher and *a cappella* bard of Sapodilla...and Peregrine's boyhood tutor as well...) — a further, even if accidental, investigation of the contents of the small dragon's cave had resulted in Peregrine's — literally — stumbling upon something of infinitely more value and weal than the bracelet of base metal inscribed *Caius loves Marianne* and the three oboli and one drachma (all stamped *Sennacherib XXXII, Great King, King of Kings, King of Lower Upper Southeast Central Assyria* — and all of a very devaluated currency) — he had tripped over a rotting leather case which contained what was believed by the one or two who, having seen it, were also competent to comment on it to be the mysterious and long-lost crown of the Ephts.

And what *had* Smarasderagd said, as though to himself, and evidently overheard only by Peregrine over the noise of the shoutings and the beatings of leathern wings? — it was....was it not?... "Ephtland, Alfland, which will be the next land?"

Peregrine said aloud, "It would be a good thing, in pursuing after him, were we to have with us a sprig or even a leaf of dragonbane."

King Alf's head snapped back up, his swollen small eyes surveyed his younger guest from head to buskin-covered toe. "'Pursue after im,' the lad says. — Ah, me boy, you're the true son of a king, lawfully hillegitimate though yer be, hand proper fit for dragon unting, too, for, ah, wasn't yer brought back to human form by means h'of dragon's hegg?"

Buck's face turned red with pleasure and his teeth shone in his mouth. "That's it, Da!" he exclaimed. "we'll hunt him down, the gurt squamous beasty-thief! And not go running off like —"

Again, though, his mother "had summat to say." And said it. Did Alf think that she and her daughters were going to traipse,

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like common camp followers, in the train of the Grand Army, whilst he and it went coursing a dragon? (*"Hand* a mad, crack-brain scheme that be, too!") Did Alf, on the other hand, intend that she and her precious daughters should attempt to make their own way to the court of Count Witenagamote, regardless of all perils and dangers along the way, and *unprotected?*

Her husband's reply commenced with a grunt. Then he turned a second time to his older guest, who had been standing first upon one leg and then upon the other. "Bert," he said, "Hi commends me wife and me datters hunto yer mercy, care, and custody, hentreating that ye keeps 'em safe huntil arriving safe at sanctuary, the court of Count Wit. Does yer haccept this charge?"

"Hac-cepted!" said the King of Bertland. "Ave no fear."

Queen Clara's mouth opened, closed. Before it could open again, the two pettikings were already drawing maps in the sawdust of the kitchen floor with a pair of roasting spits. "Now, Alf, one spot on rowt as yer mussn't homit, is *ere* —" he made a squiggle. "'Whussat?' why, that's Place Where The Dragons Dance —"

"Right chew are!" exclaimed King Alf. "For e'll be a-prancin is trihumph there for sure (Buck, my boy, never trust no reptyle)."

"Likewise," King Bert warmed to the matter, "don't forgit e'll ave to be returning *ither,*" he made another scrawl, "to is aerie-nest at Ormesthorpe, for e've a clutch o' new-laid heggs —"

Peregrine, puzzled, repeated, with altered accent, "He's got a clutch of — *what?*"

"Come, come, young man," said King Bert, a trifle testily, "Hi asn't the time ter be givin yer lessons hin nat'ral istory: suffice ter say that hall pie-skiverous dragons his hambisextuous, the darty beasts!"

Something flashed in Peregrine's mind, and he laid his hand upon King Bert's shoulder. "It seems destined that I be a party to this quest for the Treasury carried off by gurt dragon Smarasderagd," he said, slowly. "And...as King Alf has pointed out, it was a dragon's egg that helped restore me to human form...a dragon's egg which, I have been informed, is now in your own and rightful custody: now therefore, O King of Bertland, I, Peregrine, youngest son of the left hand of Paladrine King of Sapodilla, do solemnly entreat of you your kindness and favor in lending me the aforesaid dragon's egg for the duration of the aforesaid quest; how about it?"

Sundry expression's rippled over King Bert's craggy face. He was evidently pleased by the

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ceremonial manner of the request. He was evidently not so pleased about the nature of it. He swallowed. "What?... Wants the mimworms, too, does yer?... Mmmm."

"No, no. Just the egg, and purely for purposes of matching it with any other eggs as I might be finding; a pretty fool I'd look, wouldn't I, were I to waste time standing watch and ward over some nest or other merely because it had eggs in it? — and then have them turn out to be, say, a bustard's...or a crocodile's..."

This argument was so persuasive to the other king that he even, as he unwrapped the object from its wad of scarlet-dyed tow, bethought himself of other reasons — "'Like cleaves hunto like,' has Aristottle says, may it bring yer hall good luck, ar, be sure as it will" — and rewrapping it, placed it in his very own privy pouch. He then had Peregrine remove his own tunic, slung pouch and contents so that it hung under the left (or shield) arm. "There. Cover hup, now, lad," he said.

Matters suddenly began to move more rapidly after that, as though it had suddenly occurred to everyone that they didn't have forever. Provisions were hastily packed, arms quickly and grimly sorted and selected. The Grand Army of the Alves was also remustered, and four of its nine members found fit for active duty in the field. Of these, however, one — a young spearman — was exempted because of his being in the first month of his first marriage; and a second, an archer, proved to have a painful felon or whitlow on his arrow thumb. This left one other archer, a short bowman whose slight stature and swart complexion declared more than a drop or two of autochthonous blood, and a very slightly feeble-minded staff slinger, said to be quite capable of doubling as spearman in close-in fighting. ("Moreover e's the wust poacher in the kingdom and so should damn well be able to spot dragon spoor — d'ye hear, ye clod?" "Har har! — Yus, Mighty Monarch.")

The procession was obliged to pause momentarily in the open space before the cathedral church (indeed, the only church), where the apostolic vicar had suddenly become very visible. As usual, he had absented himself from the dragon ceremony on the ground of dragons being essentially pagan creatures which had not received the approbation of any church council; he was uncertain if he should pronounce a ritual gloat at the dragon's having been the cause of the king's discomfiture, or if he should give the king the church's

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blessing for being about to go and hunt the heathen thing; and he had summoned his catechumens, doorkeepers, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes and excorcists to help him in whichever task he hoped right now to be moved by the Spirit to decide.

A small boy who had climbed the immemorial elm abaft the cathedral church to get a good view, suddenly skinnied down and came running. Peregrine's was the first face he encountered and recognized as being noteworthy; so, "Eh, Meyster!" he exclaimed. "There come three men on great horses towards th' Eastern Gate, and one on 'em bears a pennon with a mailed fist —"

King Alf whirled around. "*Kyrie eleison!*" he exclaimed. "'Tis Lord Grumpit, the High King's brutal brother-in-law and *ex officio* Guardian of the Gunny Sacks (Treasury Division) — what brings him here so untimely? — he'll slay me, he'll flay me —"

Peregrine said, "Take the Western Gate. See you soonly," — and gave the King's mount a hearty slap on the rump. The clatter of its hooves still in his ears, he strode up to the ecclesiast on the church steps, the vicar regarding him so sternly that one might almost have thought he was able to discern that the waters of baptism had never yet been sprinkled, poured, or ladled upon Peregrine's still-pagan skin.

"Your Apostolic Grace," Peregrine asked, in urgent tones, "it is surely not true — *is* it? — that one presbyter may ordain another presbyter?"

The hierarch beat the butt of his crosier on the church step with such vehemence that the catechumens, doorkeepers, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes and excorcists came a-running.

"It *is* false!" he cried, in a stentorian voice. "Cursed be who declares the contrarity! Where is he, the heretic dog?"

Peregrine gestured. "Coming through the Eastern Gate even now," he said. "And one of them bears the pennon of a mailed fist, alleged to be the very sign and symbol of presbytocentrism!"

The apostolic vicar placed two fingers in his mouth, gave a piercing whistle, hoisted his crosier with the other, beckoned those in minor orders — and in none — "All hands fall to to repel heretics!" he bellowed. He had long formerly been chaplain with the Imperial Fleet. The throng, swelling on all sides, poured after him towards the Eastern Gate.

Peregrine mounted the wiry Brythonic pony which had been assigned him, smote its flanks, whooped in its ears, and passed out through the Western Gate with deliberate speed. The dragon egg nestled safe beneath his arm.

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A fine, tense story about a man who is bred for space and who must adjust to "normal" conditions. The author writes: "Born and raised in Cleveland, I'm a 21 year-old alumnus of the Clarion and Tulane writers' workshops, have been an illustrator, film critic and newspaper reporter. My work has most recently appeared in *Orbit*.

Floating

by DAVE SKAL

The midnight sun, prowling the horizon like a dusky scavenger, circling endlessly, waiting for the planet to drag me down, meager carrion. Behind me, the pack. I plow ahead the best I can; if I had legs, I'm sure I could not stand. I can barely crawl. My arms, trained for extraterrestrial skills, rebel at hauling my torso through a jungle full of slime. Yet something else crawls with me — the atavism. *Muscular hams, tarsier digits, little feet tock-tock all over my brain...*

Angela was pregnant. There had been other pregnancies aboard ship, so many, in fact, that childbirth was almost a routine occurrence. Angela's initial joy (though not surprise — conception could not be left to chance in a closed community such as ours) had rapidly given way to apprehension, however, and apprehension to morbid introspection.

A ship's jester often had to deal with such problems.

"I want an abortion," she said. She hovered silently in her zero-g sleep net; she had been there all day, and no amount of persuasion or coercion could evict her. Her green body stocking, coupled with advancing motherhood, lent a strange pear shape to her appearance.

I had to be careful. There were times when my joviality could be fatal. I called myself a jester...that's not quite right — my full title was Entertainment and Recreational Coordinator, a special member of the community, one without a

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prescribed social role. To keep four hundred people amused and happy, a wild card was needed, something intrusive. Each shipboard generation had one, raised apart from the others as a counteragent to boredom and fatigue.

Depression was difficult. The ship's psychologist, aware of my potential as a morale-boosting tool, had warned me of a general slump. This was only to be expected following a week of shock and disappointment. Disorientation had affected morale at all levels...a scrubbed mission was not particularly conducive to high spirits, especially a mission sixty years gone involving hundreds of human beings.

"You don't mean that," I said softly.

"Of course I mean it!" She spun around like a top; a single teardrop floated off into the space between us. "Don't you realize what's happening? How impossible it all is now?"

I said nothing. She stroked her compact body nervously, fingering the vestigial places under the pelvis, a common gesture of anxiety among floaters. Her anxiety was understandable — we had been caught unprepared with the first disastrous effects of diplomatic transience. The social and political climate at home base had changed radically; Earth had broken its program of "tachyon diplomacy" with the mysterious host civilization; we would no longer be expected guests. The only alternative was to disband the mission at the nearest viable system.

"Don't you see, Craig? The mission is going to end in two months. It means fending for ourselves in a high-g environment. It means our child will be born a legless monster on solid —"

"Angela!"

She looked at me squarely, unflinching. "It's not me I'm concerned about. I can prepare for the shock. We all can. But the baby—"

She was right, of course. There would be no time for genetic alteration of the upcoming generation. Our child would be one of the last "floaters" specially bred for space, a cripple and social outcast as g-relative "normality" once more took hold. It wouldn't be fair.

Angela turned away. She would survive, I knew — she could deal with anything. Anything, that is, that didn't tie her to her past.

She hovered silently in her enveloping web, a womb within a womb.

She had the abortion.

And we took the plunge.

I stare at myself in the mirror.

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Its parameters are set and rigid. There is *up* and there is *down.* There is something annoyingly wrong about it...the ship had no such limitations.

The walls have been sprayed in an obvious and insulting vector pattern, vertical arrows *up* and *down,* as if we floaters needed reminding.

I am at the bottom of the mirror. Its shape was meant for some other form than my own, something tall and elongated, a human rocket. As I stand before the soaring silver pane, straining on my fingertips, the mirror cuts off my image just below the nose.

Everything is too big.

Behind me, the door opens. It is Angela. She smiles shyly. She is wearing her prosthesis. The sensitive myoelectric sensors respond to forgotten nerve endings, and she wobbles in like a nervous foal.

"I thought we were going for a...walk," she says.

"I forgot." I like it better inside. "I've been exercising."

Her nostrils dilate, as if hunting out sweaty proof of this statement. "You're already a week behind the others."

"But I *have* been exercising." I balance on one hand, lifting a ten-pound dumbell with effortless grace. "You see? Exercise." In the zero-g environment of the mother ship, modified yoga and periodic excer-pulsor treatments kept atrophy safely at bay. Here, on the hungry planet, more strenuous activity was required. Perhaps I had been overzealous. My upraised bicep bulges spectacularly in the mirror. My prosthesis lies idle in a corner.

Angela tries another tack. "Please...I don't like to go alone. It's embarrassing." She toys with a strand of her blonde hair in a self-conscious gesture.

I look at my legs in their corner. They do not suit me. They are wiry and tense, like the limbs of a mechanical grasshopper, all springs and steel and quivering plastiflesh. I hate them.

But Angela is waiting.

The planet is a pressure cooker, largely uninhabitable except for the polar regions, where the climate approximates that of Earth's tropics. The alternating schedule of day and night is uncomfortably absent, although interior illumination has been adjusted to our diurnal rhythms. We are presently in a state of perpetual sunset.

Angela dresses too heavily for the heat as we maneuver about the special paths and courtyards. Perhaps she is eager to hide the ugly bedsores, although we all have them.

All except Zelig.

He is the physical therapist, a

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native of this colony. He is a large blustering man with a bull neck and a stentorian manner. He puts the clumsy toddlers through their paces drill-sergeant style, a true ogre of the nursery. He screams. He bellows. He chevies. He barks mercilessly at an older woman who insists on crutches; to our horror, he snaps them over his knee.

We are obviously not here to be coddled.

Tottering uncertainly, the woman is left behind on the path. "She'll learn fast enough," I hear Zelig say. I don't look back.

Angela asks Zelig to correct her posture. She pirouettes before him, carrying herself excellently. His manner is suddenly changed; he compliments her on her movements. She is flattered. He suggests some rather advanced exercises, using his own body for demonstration purposes.

I reaize that Zelig, too, is a cyborg.

"He was in an accident," Angela tells me later. "Think how traumatic it would be, to lose both legs. And *we* feel sorry for ourselves — and we only have something to gain." These are not her words, and they make me uncomfortable. I put out the light and prepare for bed. Angela does not dismount, and the cool legs slide into bed next to me, like large, expectant snakes. They are already a part of her.

A child is crying, heartbroken because her puppy is being put to sleep. There is no way it could have adapted — I remembered its pained breathing, its flippery contortions like a fish out of water. Children forget these things. Her tears are heavy and bitter. *What is the emotional weight of a teardrop, poised in space, unable to fall?*

The incident casts a general pall over the group. I try to make jokes and organize activities, but receive only token response and nervous laughter. At times it is merely polite. More often they ignore me.

I have outgrown my effectiveness. I am what they are trying to forget.

They are having an affair. I am sure of it. Environmental perceptions, apparently, are not the only things contingent upon gravity. I think of Zelig's phony legs, like animated waxworks, his feet clutching the ground like the whole damned planet belonged to him.

As usual, I have been neglecting my exercises. Zelig doesn't even bother carping at me any more. Instead, he and Angela discuss my "problem" in private.

"Zelig says you're acting childlishly," she tells me. "He says you're hiding inside yourself. He says you're afraid of failure, afraid of competition in an unfamiliar world."

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"Is that what Zelig says? How thoughtful."

"For God's sake, Craig — why do you persist in tormenting me? Do you have any idea of the laughingstock I've become because of you? Can't you be the least bit civilized, just for once —" She paces back and forth in a self-conscious display of theater.

"I don't mean to embarrass you."

"I may as well tell you now — I'm petitioning to terminate our liaison."

"Zelig?"

"Zelig has nothing to do with it!" she snaps. A reflex. "It's you, Craig. You haven't made the slightest effort to improve... dragging yourself around the apartment like a crippled spider monkey —" (the imagery was not hers) "— feeling *sorry* —"

"I'm not feeling sorry for myself."

"Then what do you call it? You're certainly not making yourself useful."

"I used to be useful." As a nonconformist.

"That was before." Pause. "You're becoming a burden. A disgrace."

"In whose eyes? The ship's? It made me what I am."

She goes to the door. "You're disgusting," she says.

I take my prosthetic appliances from their corner, activate them independently. They leap about the room like the annoying pogo sticks of colony children. Guided by clever gyroscopes, they hop blindly, until one finally crashes through a window. There are screams.

So much for technology.

Zelig comes to my quarters. Mine, because Angela has moved out. He lowers himself into a chair opposite my own. His voice seems cool and ameliorating, quite unlike the strident bark of his therapy sessions. I do not trust him.

"I thought you might want to talk," he says. "That little prank of yours yesterday...it upset quite a few people, you know." I shrug noncommittally.

Zelig continues: "It's most certainly done nothing to improve relations with the colonists, many of whom regard Step Down as a costly and extravagant drain on resources. And it will be quite some time before your prosthesis can be replaced..."

"You needn't bother."

Zelig explodes. "Goddamn you! What do you want, anyway? Ship you out in orbit somewhere, a free ride, you and what other frigging vegetables —"

(So there are others.) (But the thought does not console me.)

His anger subsides. "I'm

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sorry," he says, half meaning it. He rambles on about his own handicap, how he overcame it, won back acceptance with the tribe. He speaks of his little society in glowing terms he does not really believe. I sense resentment.

"I realize you must be under strain," he says. "But no one can help you with that. You have to be your own —" He falters. He stares at me with an expression bordering at once on incredulity and terror, then abruptly leaves. I remind him of something. And so I am dangerous, if not crazy.

I hate him more than ever. Angela, in bed with that... machine.

Then it happens.

My nonexistent legs begin to itch.

An irritating racial memory, waiting to erupt—

The pain is maddening. I tear the bed linen with my teeth. I am beginning to doubt my sanity.

Or is that too much of a cliche?

I am an Olympic runner, carrying a torch along an endless track. The sun smiles warmly; the fresh air is good in my lungs. My path is lined by thousands of people, tap-dancers and ballerinas, marching soldiers, goose-stepping gestapos out of old history tapes. A million syncopated legs drum the earth, spur me on. The torch in my hand grows brighter, the pounding increases, I feel a sudden rush of exhilaration before the ground beneath me splits in two —

I awake, heart pounding. The pain has subsided, but there is a noise in my ear, like the buzz of an insect.

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A programmed hypno-cartridge has been laid beside me.

Infuriated, I hurl it against the wall. Angela. Zelig. The itching resumes. I ignore it. I dress hastily and scamper across the courtyard to their apartment.

It is late. I creep into their bedquarters and crouch in the shadows. They are making love. Neither wears a prosthesis; these lie carelessly near the door, like the aftermath of a strange and bloodless crime. The hypocrites! They intersect like geometric figures, connecting at one point only.

"Who's there?" Angela freezes. Panic. Zelig leaps from the bed and grabs his legs. He dons them clumsily; his swollen genitals resemble a growth in the crook of a tree. Angela sees me and screams. The jester takes hold — I seize her dormant legs by the straps and drag them to the foot of the bed, like a dog fetching slippers. I am barking.

They are too shocked to follow me as I rush out. The twilight air has a disagreeable organic reek. Too much time spent in air-locked, antiseptic chambers —

An angry cyborg cluster is soon after me. Their voices grow louder as I plow on into the swamp. Curses and foul language — their machines fail them! They dismount and continue, following me more deeply into the swamp of themselves. I welcome its liquid grasp, drown my phantom limbs. In madness I am free. The water buoys me up. Floating.

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Nothing can stop a dumb idea whose time has come; *Three Trips in Time and Space* is yet another collection of original stories on a set theme. Ever since the ill-fated Twayne Triplets, this has been a known method of getting bad stories from good writers; nevertheless, its popularity continues to grow. Maybe it's just that publishers, a race subject to childish superstitions, believe that a book needs a gimmick if it is to sell. Perhaps at this very moment, another theme anthology is being born, in a conversation something like this:

Editor: Sam, give me some money. I'll put together a collection of original sf for you.

Publisher: Sf? Oh, you mean sci-fi. What's the gimmick?

Editor: You'll love it. Listen to this: *Strange Fruits.* The blurb is "All New Tales of Alien Effeminacy."

Publisher: No good. We bought the same idea from Elwood last month.

Editor: That's all right; I've got a million of them. How about *Wine of the Dreamers?* Four giants of science fiction accept the challenge of writing a story while dead drunk.

In the case at hand, the challenge is less exotic; as posed by Robert Silverberg, it is to write a

SIDNEY COLEMAN
Books

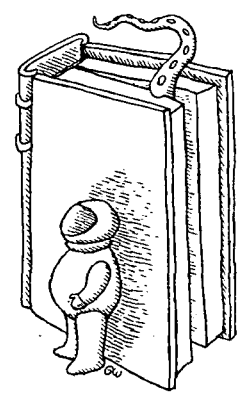
Three Trips in Time and Space, by Larry Niven, John Brunner and Jack Vance. Foreword by Robert Silverberg. Hawthorn, $5.95.

Beyond the Resurrection, by Gordon Eklund. Doubleday, $5.95.

The God Machine, by William Jon Watkins. Doubleday, $5.95.

*Today and Tomorrow and...*by Isaac Asimov. Doubleday $6.95.

Playboy's Gahan Wilson by Gahan Wilson, Playboy Press, $2.50.



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story about the social effects of an inexpensive system of virtually instantaneous travel to any point on the earth's surface (and to any point in time, if the author wishes).

This would seem to be a natural topic for Larry Niven. Teleportation networks have figured in his past work, and he has published an ingenious essay on the subject. "Flash Crowd" is thus a large disappointment. Niven's best work is as tightly organized as a Feydeau farce. Plot twist is piled on plot twist, revelation upon revelation, until the whole thing ends in an explosion of wonder. "Flash Crowd," in contrast, is slapdash and flaccid. The hero is a newsman, a graduate of journalism school, working for a television network that is devoted almost exclusively to news programs. Under the stated conditions, one would expect him to be reasonably well-informed. Yet he has to spend the larger part of "Flash Crowd" scurrying about discovering elementary facts about the transportation system that has shaped his world, facts he should have known before the story began. As a final clumsy touch, his education includes a twelve-page guided tour of the Wonders of the New World, conducted by the inventor of the teleportation system in person. This is the true manner of Edward Bellamy ("And now, stranger from the past, let us show you the Great Steam Grommet Works"). We usually get better than this from Niven; maybe he's just tired of teleportation.

John Brunner has chosen to invert Silverberg's premise; his transportation system is expensive, inconvenient, and ineptly managed. This last is no surprise, for the world of "You'll Take the High Road" is a garden of ineptitude. Brunner's protagonist is pure shmoe, willing to go wherever he's pointed, and the subsidiary characters are a collection of lackwits any one of whom would lose at tic-tac-toe to a Christopher Anvil alien. All of this is done for comic effect, which is enhanced by sure-fire boffola routines involving collapsing chairs, officious bureaucrats, and malfunctioning automata. To this is added broad burlesques of hucksters, organization men, and various status seekers.

Yes, it's true. In 1973, the author of *Stand On Zanzibar* has published a perfect replica of a mid-fifties *Galaxy* lead novella. As a feat of re-creation, this may well rank with the rebreeding of the extinct auroch. Unfortunately, since the duplicate is just as dull and unfunny as the originals, it is hard to see why Brunner bothered.

"Rumfuddle" is a good average Jack Vance story, *i. e.*, a marvel. Vance's version of the miraculous

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transporter is a method of building portals to alternate worlds ("cognates"). These are infinite in number; some are cognate to our world in the present, some to our world at various times in the past. (Travel to future cognates is forbidden by the necessities of the plot, thinly disguised in the text as the law of conservation of energy.)

The large-scale social effects of this are sketched in with great skill (*e.g.*, private homes are replaced by private worlds, but the original earth remains as a locus for communal activities like the schooling of children), but Vance's primary concern is with small-scale effects, moral effects. Vance has always been sharply aware of how much technology (which, for Vance, includes magic) influences morality, how changes in human powers produce changes in human judgments. This is one reason why Vance's far-future societies are so convincingly alien; his people are true citizens of the future, not just twentieth-century Americans in fancy dress.

In "Rumfuddle" the changes are just beginning. New powers are giving birth to new vices, or reviving old ones in new forms. I won't spoil Vance's surprise by telling you what rumfuddlers do, but I will tell you that the Countess Elizabeth Bathory enters the story in two ways: explicitly, as a character, and implicitly, as an example, someone corrupted by easy power, descending the ladder from beating peasant girls to bathing in their blood. Cognates.

"Rumfuddle" is written in Vance's unmistakable style. It is a strange style for a writer of exotic adventures, a man who treats subjects we are used to having described in the lush tones of A. Merritt and his epigones. Vance's style is anything but lush; he seems to have a hatred of simile and metaphor; his voice is dry, particular, witty, precise. He wants us to see his wonders new and fresh, not bedazzle us with borrowed glamours. Here is an example; an obsolete town is being dismantled; the debris is being dumped in an ocean reserved for this purpose on a pre-Cambrian cognate world:

> Six hours a day, four days a week, he guided a trashing machine across deserted Cupertino, destroying tract houses, service stations, and supermarkets. Knobs and toggles controlled a steel hammer at the end of a hundred-foot boom; with a twitch of the finger, Duray toppled power-poles, exploded picture windows, smashed siding and stucco, pulverized concrete. A disposal rig crawled fifty feet behind. The detritus was clawed upon a conveyor-belt, carried to a twenty-foot orifice, and dumped with a rush and a rumble into the Apathetic Ocean.

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"The Apathetic Ocean." Just right! As marvelous as "the Pacific Ocean" must have been, when the words were new. But Vance has made them new for us again, which is one of the things that science fiction is about, or poetry; I'm not sure of the difference sometimes.

Gordon Eklund must love hard problems, because he sets himself so many of them. In *Beyond the Resurrection* he tries to do the damnedest things; sometimes he fails, but he succeeds often enough to make this a fascinating and rewarding book.

Beyond the Resurrection is set in the near future in a small, failing experimental school. One of the students, a colorless, withdrawn boy named August, suddenly becomes the origin of an epidemic of transcendence. He physically merges with another student, a literal sharing of flesh. After a time, the doublet divides into its components; August is as before, but the second student has changed. She has been transformed, reborn into something like a state of mystical transcendence. The story follows the consequences of this remarkable event for three days, until August's destruction by agents of the state.

Rebirth into a higher form of being occurs often enough in science fiction, but usually only at the end of the story, where it can be masked in clouds of smoke and rhetoric. Indeed, this is one of the standard cop-out endings; the paraclete, in one form or another, is the sf equivalent of the U. S. Cavalry in westerns, always ready to descend and save the plot. Eklund has chosen to use rebirth as a subject rather than a gimmick; we see his Reborn close-up, both inside and outside views.

This is one of the hard problems referred to above. The inside views are among Eklund's failures; the more we learn about the experience of rebirth, the more ill-defined and fuzzy it becomes. (A related failure is the artificial and unconvincing explanation of the origin of August's power.) The outside views, though, are something else altogether. *Beyond the Resurrection* is told from many viewpoints; Eklund switches among four main characters and several minor ones. This is another hard problem, and one that is handled brilliantly. Each of the viewpoint characters is a fully realized individual, with a complex inner life that affects his response to the events of the story. Chapter Four, told from the viewpoint of a near-madman, is especially dazzling, but just as good, in a different way, is Eklund's perception of how, for a man in a certain emotional position, even the Coming of the Messiah is just

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another damned thing to worry about.

There is a lot in this book, and a lot to be said about it. I could tell you, for example, that the New Morning School is based upon an eccentric system of psychotherapy, and that the reader is gradually led to realize that this system is a failure, and that he equally gradually realizes that this system bears quite a few resemblances to Scientology, and that all this is done with such cunning that the result is not a parody of nut-cults but a touching and sympathetic meditation upon them. Or I could tell you that Eklund's prose is usually beautifully flexible and evocative, but sometimes becomes overinflated. (One chapter is called "When Is This Time Called Now?" If this is not a quotation from Rod McKuen, it should be.)

Let me put it this way: Barcelona contains the masterwork of the architect Gaudi, the Cathedral of the Holy Family. The building was never finished; wonderful towers encrusted with multi-colored tiles leap out of bare iron frameworks. It is not a complete work of architecture, but any visitor to Barcelona who refuses to see it for that reason is a fool. Just so for *Beyond the Resurrection,* with one exception: Gordon Eklund is a young man, and growing in his craft with each book he publishes. I think that someday he will give us a complete cathedral.

At the beginning of *The God Machine,* the reader finds Dr. Welsh, the book's hero, in a complete dystopia, a vicious police state that conducts mass purges, bugs its citizens, pollutes the atmosphere, and flies SSTs. Dr. Welsh occupies an ambiguous position in this society. He is a good guy and a lover of freedom, but he is also a Government hero, for it was his pioneer studies of non-verbal behavior, "the subtle persuasive powers beyond speech," that led to the awful thought-control methods of the dread Rehabilitation Squad.

When I reached this point in *The God Machine* (p. 4), I thought I knew what to expect. Dr. Welsh would join the underground and use his superior knowledge to help them smash the state. I also thought that this might be amusing; it's a nice idea — Erving Goffman as James Bond. What I was not prepared for was this:

> He stiffened the first two fingers of his right hand and drove them upward through the socket of the man's left eye. He uncoiled his body with the blow and hooked his fingers upward as he felt them go through the flimsy bone at the back of the socket. The tips of his fingers

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> anchored themselves behind the forehead and he snapped his arm back, drawing the thug forward by the inside of his skull.

It goes on more or less like this for the whole book. From a long loving description, near the end of the book, of the destruction of an army of bad guys:

> The mixture of gasoline from the broken gas tanks and blood from the broken bodies made them look more like squashed tomatoes thrown from a passing car than like trucks.

Pornography is a slippery term in criticism, but it's a well-defined category of commercial fiction. The mark of commercial pornography is that the plot functions only as an armature on which the author can place erotic incidents. *The God Machine* fits this description, if "erotic" is replaced by "homicidal"; it is an example of the pornography of murder.

I can think of two possibilities: (1) William Jon Watkins is a hack; he produced this book because there is a ready market for kill-porn. (2) William Jon Watkins is sincere; this nasty and repellent little book was written by a nasty and repellent little man. Either way, it's a sobering thought.

F&SF's Good Doctor and Mad Cartoonist do contribute to other publications — we would not mislead you — and two new collections have just been published that you'll want to know about, that is, run out and buy.

Today and Tomorrow And... is a collection of 32 of Isaac Asimov's science essays, written for magazines ranging from *Chemical and Engineering News to Penthouse.* Included are four articles about science fiction. Dr. Asimov explains in the introduction that the needs of other magazine editors sometimes force a departure from the informal F&SF style that he (and you and I) are comfortable with. But for this book he has revised the essays and put them back in their original shape. So you are sure to enjoy.

Playboy's Gahan Wilson is a big collection — more than 280 cartoons, 145 in full color — and at $2.50 it's a terrific bargain. Open it anywhere (e.g. page 50: "One small step for a znargh — a giant stride for znarghkind!"), and you can forget anything else until you've savored each and every one of the 280.

—*E.L.F.*

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"First, I'd like to take this opportunity to clear up these silly rumors about my having made a deal with the devil..."

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In which Brigadier Ffellowes (last seen here in "And The Voice of the Turtle," October 1972) runs into a test of sorts at the club and comes through, as usual, in extraordinary form.

Thinking Of The Unthinkable

by STERLING E. LANIER

"Well," said a new member, "from what you guys tell me, he's either a total fraud or just maybe one of those odd types who attract things, a man to whom things just happen. There doesn't seem to be any thing, or any place, that he hasn't seen or visited. I once knew a man in the war, World War II, who managed to get transferred to every invasion point; just by sheer bad luck, no finagling. He'd get shot up and leave the hospital to find he was in the first wave at Omaha Beach or something. Happened about six times. So maybe your brigadier has that to him, a magnetism for weird events."

We were in the club library and, of course, discussing Ffellowes. It was cold as hell out, and he hadn't been around for a week or so. Our British member didn't like cold weather; despite his implausible adventures all over the globe, in every branch of Her Majesty's Services, he stayed home, wherever it was, and warm when the New York streets got icy. No one ever asked him where he lived, and his mail came to the club, where it was kept for him.

"He's not home, because I saw him in Washington yesterday." The voice was that of a man named Onderdonk, who had something diplomatic to do with NATO and flew back and forth to Europe regularly. He was a regular in Ffellowes' circle of listeners, and a nice guy, in a quiet way. "I saw him coming out of the Pentagon and he was walking along with an American rear admiral. I don't know the admiral personally, but I do know he's a hush-hush type, something to do with advanced research."

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There was a period of silence while we thought this one over. We had all heard Ffellowes say many times that he was fully retired. But why should he be? Another layer was added to our mystery member.

"If Williams were here, which, Thank God, he is not," said Onderdonk, "he'd say Ffellowes went down to buy cheap booze and cadge meals at the Pentagon restaurants."

Since this was so like Williams, it took a long time for the laughter to die down.

The new member, who was not so new as to have missed Mason Williams, or found him anything but unlovable, still wanted to pursue the subject.

"Did you guys ever run a test on this Ffellowes?" was his next tack. "It seems to me you could pick a subject, like say conditions on the Moon, or a famous haunted house, anything like that. If he's a fake, he'll be a pretty good bet to rise to it, and claim to have been there. I know he's a friend of yours, but don't you ever wonder...?"

Since we all, separately and collectively, had wondered, and often, about Ffellowes' stories, there was a further silence. We all liked him, except Williams, of course, but was he the best liar on record? Or was he something else?

"Something for which there is no logical explanation, would be a good bet," mused another man, "but it would have to be something well-known at the same time, I mean something people had puzzled about, had given a lot of thought to."

The new member had been thinking hard. He slammed his palm down on his knee with a crack. "What about the Loch Ness Monster?"

We all looked at each other. The damned thing was in the papers at least six times a year or more. A regular, organized group had been trying to get pictures of it for ten years. It was supposed to have been tracked on sonar. Why, questions about it were even asked in England's Parliament.

A babble of approval went around the circle. It was perfect, and best of all, there was no harm in it. If Ffellowes denied any knowledge of the thing, no harm was done, no feelings could be hurt. We lifted our glasses, still laughing, and gave a ringing toast: "To the Loch Ness Monster!"

We had forgotten that our absent member, Ffellowes, liked the back staircase, which opens into an alcove of the library; and he moved like a ghost, out of habit, he said. We still had our glasses lifted when there he was, dropping into a vacant seat and pressing the bell for a waiter, the faint quizzical smile on his face as he looked around.

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"What's the Scottish Enigma done now, to be so praised, eh? Must have et a Russian sub, to have all you chaps applauding."

Onderdonk was quick. "Glad to see you, Ffellowes. We were applauding the fact that a few mysteries still remain in the world, to make us humble. The monster seemed to symbolize them, so to speak." He then introduced Ffellowes to the new member, while the rest of us caught our breaths.

The brigadier shook hands politely, but absently. To the old hands, the silence in the book-lined room was deafening. We knew the look. There was, or might be, a story. Something was on his mind.

He got his drink, sipped it reflectively, then looked around at us. "I see what you chaps mean, about the symbol of the Unknown, that is, keeping us human, as it were, and even 'Humble before the Lord.' A zoologist of my acquaintance once advocated, in all seriousness, mind you, loosing every variety of poisonous vermin, snakes, scorpions and all that, plus all known breeds of man-eating cat, on all the civilized countries. The idea was not dissimilar, don't you know. Keep the people humble and in fear of externals over which they had no control. Keep them from feeling they were not either gods or God. One would think that earthquakes, famine, typhoons and such would be enough, but when I mentioned this, the chap said 'No.' It has to be more personal, more intimate. People are terrified of man-eating sharks, for example, though the chances of being bit by one are minuscule compared to crossing a village street in one of your suburbs, one of mine, for that matter, without being mashed by a carelessly driven van." He sipped and we waited.

"Still and all, I don't feel much like joining your particular toast. The casual references in the newspapers to Loch Ness frankly give me the grue." He paused. "I know a trifle too much about that phenomenon to be even relaxed, you see. In fact, it doesn't really bear thinking about at all."

There was a sigh from the new member, but Ffellowes either missed or ignore it.

"I suppose you'd be annoyed at my stopping there, after being so mysterious?" Once again the faint smile was visible. "I don't mind telling it now, though, before I'm through, you may all regret it.

"It would have been in the summer of '43. I had come home from a rather shaky thing in North Africa and was given some leave. I chose to spend it at a small inn near Inverness, owned by a delightful old Scot of ancient lineage named George Smith. We used to tour the neighboring distilleries, all run by

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chums of his, and even in wartime, the uncut Scotch, about 120 proof before watering, mind you, was always somehow available. Between such visits, we found time to visit sites like Culloden, Bannockburn, and Flodden. The drink helped to re-enact old battles. All glorious fun, quite illegal, including the petrol for our car, and essentially harmless. That is, until we got to Innisdracht. And there we met, George and I, Professor Randolf Hafstad.

"We had come in for a drink, it being a dampish evening, to The Old Pretender. This was a rather natty pub, though cramped by wartime, on the east shore of Loch Ness. It was a nasty night. The bar was empty, but in the private, so-called, a hunched figure crouched over a glass. George and I got our drinks, not really needed, I may say; it had been a wet afternoon at a local distillery, and we were in a jovial mood. We seated ourselves near the stranger, and when he looked around, we raised our glasses. To my surprise, he raised his tankard, which contained beer, and then moved over to join us. 'Obviously not English,' was my first reaction.

"He was a big elderly man, clean-shaven, with huge hands, clear blue eyes and a long, hooked nose. His face was long and also solid and supported the nose well. His hair was black, flecked with grey and combed neatly backward. His massive shoulders were masked by a sort of boat cloak, something like the old caped overcoats of my father's day, and he carried a heavy wool hat in his free hand. His first words were somewhat disconcerting.

"'So, gentlemen, you have come to see the destruction of Europe?' His English was very fluent, with a faint trace of two things, one being an American accent (he had been at college there, it transpired), the other thing being the curious sing-song of the Norse peoples, with a rise and fall in every sentence.

"'Wha's that, man?' said George, in his thickest Scots accent, which I will not attempt to imitate.

"The man smiled, not at all unpleasantly, and introduced himself. He had been a professor at some tiny Norwegian university, Stavanger, I think, or was until Quisling, Hitler, *et al.* had turned him out and into a refugee. His wife was dead, as was one son. The other was in the forces somewhere. Meanwhile, Dr. Hafstad was billeted in this Scottish backwater and pursuing his avocation as a hobby. He was, in fact, a geologist. When he paused, George, who had caught his first odd remark and was brooding over it, returned to the attack.

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"'Wha's the business about the destruction of Europe?' George had taken just enough to make him argumentative. Not combative, mind you. But he had seized a subject and would not let go.

"'What do you know of the geology of Europe?' was the somewhat enigmatic answer. It turned out we neither of us knew anything, so he told us, in a sonorous drone that must have put his students to sleep in buckets in the past.

"We heard all about varves, thermoclines, Pleistocene recessions, gneiss, schist, continental shelves, faults, the Riss, Mindel and Wurm Glaciations; the man missed nothing. And yet, somehow, he kept us interested. For one thing, he kept interspersing the most peculiar remarks into his lecture. There would be a longish strip on cave faults or something and then, 'If Hitler knew; seven bombers on the right incline.' Now, then, I began to prick up my ears. I had taken a fair load of spirits, but I had a goodish head. Was the man a confused idiot or an Axis sympathizer?

"The learned rigmorale went on, and so did the baffling interjections. 'If there is a Wakening, what then? Ragnarok' While I was mulling over this, we were back in cave faults, conterminous flaws in Welsh Sandstone, the unnoticed work of one Sergius of the University of Uppsala, some obscure savant of his acquaintance apparently. The whole thing was at one time a conversation, or rather monologue, from a pedantic bore, and then again a refreshing change from the casual chats with distillery officials, procurators fiscal, Gaelic revivalists and other types with whom George had tried to enliven my leave. Yet...there was something else. I tried to focus upon it, 'nail it down,' as you chaps say.

"Suddenly, as these things come upon one after a few glasses, I found my clue. The man was dreadfully in earnest. He was also frightened, and trying to conceal it. Underneath all this learned gibberish, was an appeal. In the only way he could, the retired professor was asking somehow for help, for comfort, for succor in some form or other.

"George, who had been quite as silent as I for many long minutes, caught it too. He was — George, I mean — a short, broad Scot, who did not care to discuss his income, or indeed anything, with strangers, save for the iniquities of the firm conviction that Smith was a Scottish name, rudely captured by the Sassenach invaders. He owned, in fee simple, four fishing villages, had twice refused a peerage. He had three sons in the British army. Two others were dead, one of them

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a pilot in the Battle of Britain. In a locked drawer was his own D.S.C. from the First War. He was, in many ways, a typical Scot. Now he drained his glass and looked fixedly at Hafstad, who had momentarily withdrawn into his tankard. "'Man, wha's amiss with ye? You're black with fear of somm'at. Do you need help?'

"The clear blue eyes appeared over the tankard and inspected both of us. 'You do not laugh? You do not think here is a crazy old Norwegian who should be shut in a house for the mad?'

"I was personally out of this, you understand. I could see that George had got on our strange friend's wavelength, though, and I shut up. The intensity, for want of a better term, that the man projected had touched me, however.

"His inspection seemed to ease his mind. Abruptly, he stood up, and he was a big chap, over six foot and broad. When he put on his hat, which had a droopy brim, I thought of Odin and wondered if two ravens were hid on the premises.

"'Come,' he said. 'I have made calculations for over a year now. I will show you the end of the world, the world as you now know it. I will show you the Abomination of Desolation as the Israelites knew it, and as my own ancestors knew it even better. This is why I have come tonight to this place.'

"We got up, paid our score, collected our hats and coats and went out after him. It was not until I had seen the loch, gleaming in the summer moonlight, no more than a few hundred yards away below us that I realized where we were heading. George was silent, his head bowed, and his hat jammed down on his big head. We simply stumped along, following our leader down the slope from the inn, across the road and through the heather and gorse on the other side, down, down to the shore of the cold lake itself.

"And all the while, Hafstad was talking. The talk was still the same, all about geology, the interconnected, underground linkages through Scandinavia and Great Britain, the Irish lakes, the Swedish lakes, the confluence of currents, the intermeshing of tides, the rocks and their characteristics, the underlying faults. But there was more. In between the other stuff kept coming one word.

"Appearances. There had been few Appearances in Sweden lately, but many in Scotland. Appearances were down, it seemed in Norway, but the war might have had an effect; reporting might be out. Irish Appearances were well up to the mark, however, so far as one could judge, and realizing that the Free State was neutral. This was mixed up with more of the geology lecture,

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but I found myself nodding my head gravely, wondering when the next Appearance would occur. It seemed important somehow, since the old visionary who was leading us thought it must be so.

"No doubt you chaps will think I was naive. Yet I dare swear that until the three of us were standing on a sort of rock shelf at the water's edge, no more, even later, I had no idea what all this was leading up to.

"Our guide took up his stand at the very lip of the stone and turned now to face us. He was very impressive in his cape and his droopy hat, especially as he gestured toward the glassy mere behind him.

"'Watch, you two! You will see something others have seen before, and made themselves the scorn of their equals. But you are the first besides myself to *understand!*'"

Ffellowes stopped talking, and there was the silence that falls on all of his stories. I did notice the new member, out of the corner of my eye. His mouth was slightly open and an unlit cigarette was in his hand. The night noises of the winter city, coming through the closed drapes over the windows, sounded far off and in another time.

"Professor Hafstad reached into his inside pocket and produced a large old-fashioned watch, which he inspected and restored to its recess," the brigadier continued, his even voice leaving every clipped syllable flawless and perfectly clear. "George and I stood, immobile, while he turned and waved at the placid water behind him, whose tiny wavelets lapped almost at his feet. All was still under the moon, and the wisps of cold fog rising off the dark surface did not hide, but rather revealed the far expanse of the loch, though hiding the distant shore.

"We watched, and suddenly there was indeed an Appearance. Without warning, the loch was in motion. Something arose, grew in size and moved. It was not far offshore. What did it resemble? At first blush, something very thick and rather flexible, not unlike hose, garden hose. It waved. There was a thin part, near the tip, then a broadening at the tip itself. It grew larger or perhaps longer, as it extended itself.

"'There! Now you see the peril! Now you at least understand!' It was our new leader and his voice was far louder and more ringing than it had been in the inn. A trifle too loud, I fancy.

"I have said the Appearance was not far offshore. In fact, it was very close. Too close. In one fluid motion, it bent, like the trunk of some quadruple-magnified and quite improbable elephant. One moment had the professor with us.

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The next did not. I had a close look, a rather closer look than I needed, at something rippling down upon us.

"I next saw the loch rippling under the moon and the swirls of mist rising again. The small waves were now much larger and swirled up almost to my boots.

"George, who like myself had stood in silence during this visitation now looked up, and I saw his face in the moonlight. He was nodding his head gravely. 'Ah, Nessie,' he said. 'Ye're a bad, bad gurrl. Why for did ye do that?'

"I must have made some sort of strangled noise at this point, for he turned and looked calmly at me. 'Donald, man, he called it and it tuk him. Now we'd best awa', you and me. The procurator fiscal in this parish is a devil for asking questions. We'll go the noo, and avoid all the trouble.'

"Since I was totally blank, had no understanding of what had happened and was in fact stunned, I suffered myself to be led away. We climbed the gentle slope again, found our battered Morris van in front of the inn, which was now dark by the bye, and drove off. We had gone some miles on our way home across the quiet moorland before George took one hand off the wheel and patted my shoulder in a rough way.

"'Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach. He was a nice man, but Nessie doesna' ken these fine distinctions. It happens now and again. Saint Columba was the last man to argue wi' her, and he was a very holy man. Puir mortals like us can hardly make the pace.' He resumed driving, and the next morning, when I tried to raise the subject, stared me into silence."

Ffellowes put down his empty glass and stretched. Then he looked at us. "Having seen that, you will understand why I find drinking a bumper to the dear old Scottish pet rather hard to do."

The new member stuck his neck out. "Excuse me, sir, but I don't quite get it. Why, other than the obvious, *were* you so appalled?"

The brigadier stared past him at the unlit fireplace, as if he were thinking, or perhaps remembering.

"My dear man. Possibly you suffer from deafness. Perhaps, though I doubt it, I may have been obscure. When the thing, or Appearance, swung down, I saw certain vast circular marks, cicatrices, or what have you, on its surface. *Disks,* if that makes it plainer. In other words, chum, a *single, colossal tentacle.* I do not personally care to speculate on its point of origin."

No one said anything. The new member stared at the empty fireplace. When I looked up, the brigadier had gone.

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Like everyone else, Ron Goulart has evidently been giving some thought to soaring prices and inflation. In this new story, he extrapolates the cost of living into a formidable adversary for Les Flanner, on a mission for the National Security Office.

Down And Out

by RON GOULART

He was arguing with a toilet when the government agent located him.

"A buck and a half to use one with a door?" Les Flanner said, pounding on the dented cubicle door. "Since when?" The heavy lock mechanism jiggled.

The white door had a voxbox mounted behind a theft-proof grille. "Since the Public Facilities Act of 1994 last year, bo. So pay up or shut up."

"A buck and a half," repeated Les. "Keep your lousy privacy. I'll use an open one." He was tall, sallow at the moment, gaunt and shabby. He had a prickly four-day beard, and his narrow face was gritty and smeared.

"Les, I want to talk to you," said someone behind him.

Not turning, Les held out his rough right hand. "Give me two bucks."

"I've got my aircruiser hovering outside. Come on along with me."

Slowly Les turned to face the dapper little blond man behind him. "Hello, Hersh. I don't work for you any more."

"That's what I want to talk to you about, Les."

"Give me the two bucks first."

"Les, we've got a john on the aircruiser," said the little forty-year-old Hershey Gorman of the National Security Office. "Not to mention a shower stall, a roomy sauna area and a lady barber android."

Les kept his hand held out. "I want to impress this toilet," he said. "I don't live in your aircruiser, I live in the Tenderloin here in Frisco."

"I never carry much money with me, Les. It spoils the lay of my suit." The NSO agent's suit was ice-cream white. Reluctantly he reached inside his tunic to feel for money. "Okay, here's a five dollar piece."

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Taking the Agnew five, Les pushed it into the money slot. "Here's five, schmuck. I want three bucks change."

"Yes, sir. Coming right up, sir." Three Nixon dollars fell into Les' gaunt hand, and then the door swung open.

He strode into the cubicle and sat down. "I don't want to work for you any more, Hersh," he said. "I explained all that when I quit back in 1993."

"But to live like this for seventeen months," said the dapper little white-suited agent on the other side of the door.

"You get used to it," Les answered. "It's been nineteen months, by the way."

"That's even worse." Gorman cleared his throat, shifted his bright-polished boots on the tacky floor. "Listen, I'm prepared to help you get back on your feet again. NSO is even willing to let bygones be bygones in terms of the financial thing. We'll cancel most of..."

"I understood it, Les." Gorman leaned his head toward the rutted door. "You couldn't take the financial pressures of your position, so you..."

"Chickened out," said Les inside the cubicle. "Went blooey. Lost my home in the Orinda Upper Middle Class Commune, lost my sophisticated willowy blonde wife, my aircruiser, my simulated Cord landcar, everything. And even then I was still in hock to the United States Credit Service, the Doomsday Bureau and Banx. I simply wasn't capable of living comfortably on $75,000 a year."

"Who is? But you were a promising NSO agent, Les. Especially in the duplicity area. Boy, there wasn't anyone as good as you when it came to conning suspects, to posing as..."

"I get it," said Les, standing up again and kicking the flush button with one shabby plastic moccasin. "You've got another impersonation job. You're tring to lure me out of the security of the Tenderloin."

"What kind of security is this? You live off the $100 a week provided by the California Dole Committee. You look like the walking dead. You can't afford the price of a john."

"No, I can afford it," said Les, returning. "It's that I hate to pay a whole buck and a half for one with a door. Give me another buck. I want to have my hands washed."

"I already gave you five, remember?"

"So one more won't matter."

Sighing, Gorman felt himself. "All right, here's a silver dollar."

"Howdy do, sar," grinned the big washroom andy when Les inserted the borrowed coin in its front. He leaned, stretched a creaking arm out and unlocked the

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sanitizing nozzle compartment on the pseudotile wall. "You gwine ter get all spotless clean in a jiffy, sar."

Les held his hands under the nozzle for a half minute.

"Dey allows tipping here, sar," suggested the android.

"A whole buck to wash my hands," said Les. "And you expect a tip. Ha!"

The two men climbed up out of the public bathroom. There was shooting going on on the ground level. A half dozen young derelicts were leaping up at Gorman's dazzling scarlet aircruiser, which hung six feet above dirty Mason Street.

"Hey, you can't strip it," called Gorman. "It's got an automatic repel system."

Flashes of stun energy were being discharged from strategic points on the underside of the hovering craft. One of the derelicts, a sixteen-year-old Chinese boy with a tin arm, got hit and froze in midair in a stretched-out jumping position. He seemed to float in the muddy air for an instant before he plummeted to the ground.

Gorman reached beneath his ice-cream-white tunic to draw his stunrod from its armpit holster. "Get back out of the way, the rest of you."

"Doesn't the gun spoil the lay of your suit?" asked Les as a ladder unfurled out of the ship.

After thwacking a stubborn derelict, Gorman grabbed hold of the bottommost rung. "Come on up and we'll talk this over."

"Talk what over?"

"I have a job which calls for your particular abilities."

"You've got a tall skinny guy you want impersonated?"

"That's part of it, yes."

Shrugging one narrow shoulder, Les said, "I don't think I want to live on the outside any more."

"Let's talk about it anyway."

Finally Les said, "Okay, I can at least do that."

There was nothing below them but the quiet Pacific, stretching blue in all directions.

"I haven't seen the ocean for a while," said Les as he looked down through the viewhole.

"Living in Frisco, I'd think you'd see a lot of it."

"That's secured territory out there along the sea. They keep us deadbeats below Van Ness, or try to."

"Les, a guy with your potential..."

"Tell me more about this NSO job."

The dapper little Gorman flicked a dash toggle. "Look at monitor screen 3."

Les glanced at the bank of small plate-shaped screens on the cabin wall. "Pretty girl. Who is she?"

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"Bethel Knaught, only daughter of Garret Knaught, the teleport king," explained Gorman, nodding at the moving image of the auburn-haired girl. "Age 26, net worth $26 million."

"She has nice eyes, and I like the way her cheek bones slant like that." Les scratched at the stubble on his chin. "What does NSO want done to her?"

"Nothing serious," Gorman assured him. "She's a very independent girl, teleports all over the world as the whim strikes her."

"She owns the company, she probably gets to ride free," said Les. "I wanted to teleport up to Sacramento last month, and they wanted $56 for the trip. One way. One way to Sacto and they ask $56. I told them to forget it."

"Miss Knaught is very active in the National Nutrition Party. She's especially concerned with the war in Brazil."

Grinning, Les looked from the image of the pretty girl to the face of his former boss. "She's probably going to Brazil to talk to one of the guerrilla leaders, huh?"

Gorman nodded. "Right, Les. She has an interview set up with Tio Martelo himself, the head man of the rebels."

Les' head was swinging slowly from side to side. "Nope," he said. "I can see what's coming. Nope, I don't want to do it."

"It's vitally important to United States security, Les."

"You guys think everything is."

"We've got a new bug now, Les. It's really an improvement over the old ones. Really, you can implant it in half a minute." Gorman watched Les' thin face hopefully.

"She has to be unconscious when it's planted?"

"Asleep anyway," answered the NSO man. "We could simply waylay the girl, stun her and plant the damn thing. The trouble is..."

"You can't go up and stun a girl with $26 million," said Les.

"Old Knaught himself is very active in the Opposition Party. So we have to do this subtly."

"Subtly. Meaning I have to go to bed with her and plant the listening device under her skin."

"She'll never notice it. It's detection proof, virtually and it hasn't had any negative side effects so far."

Les rubbed his fingertips over his rough face. "Who am I supposed to be?"

"This fellow." The dapper NSO agent punched up another spool of film. "This is Billy Howlin."

"Billy? What kind of first name is that?"

The screen next to number 3 showed a lean, smiling young man with platinum hair.

"Howlin's up in the 2 million-a-year income bracket," explained

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Gorman. "Has an interest in a pornographic cassette business called Forno, Inc."

"I'm too old," Les pointed out. "He's not even thirty."

"We can fix that, the same time we dye your hair," Gorman said. "You'll have to spend a week at a Rehab Center anyway, getting spruced up and so on."

"Where's the real Billy?"

"He's being detained in Guam, over some illegal dealings with China II," said Gorman. "The point is, he's able to move in the same social circles as the Knaught girl. She knows him, but not that well. He's been away in the Orient for a year anyhow. And we can fix you up to look pretty much like him."

Les leaned back in the passenger chair, his eyes half closing. "I don't know, Hersh," he said. "I don't know if I'm ready for the outside life yet."

"Look, you came along and listened," Gorman told him. "To me that indicates you're ready for a try at rehabilitation."

Eyes closed completely, Les said, "Maybe so."

"Take the job then."

"Okay," said Les.

The guest Mexican cyborg was standing on a pedestal. The pedestal was high and wide, rotating slowly so all the guests on the simulated lawn could view him and the model grape arbor he was holding up in his chrome picking hand.

Les wasn't listening to the man. He was at this Mechanical Mexican Pickers Union benefit cocktail party in the Laguna Sector of Greater Los Angeles to make a try at meeting Bethel Knaught.

A rolling copper-colored serving robot braked to a gentle stop in front of him. "Drink, sir?"

"Vegetable juice, if you have any," he said. Les had spent three and a half weeks at the NSO Rehab Center up north. He was not so gaunt now, not scruffy at all. His face and hair had been worked on until he was a fair replica of Billy Howlin.

"Oh, yes, sir." A door in the robot's front sprang open to reveal a juicer.

While the mechanism quietly roared, a voice behind Les said, "Since when, Billy?"

"You've won me over, Bethel," he said, turning a smile at the pretty auburn-haired girl in the foil cocktail dress. "All that Nutritional Party propaganda has had an effect. As a matter of fact..."

"Um...sir?" Metal fingers tapped his elbow.

Les recognized the man, a sad-faced cyborg. He'd dealt with him before dropping into the Tenderloin. It was Merriwell, the

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California trouble shooter for Banx. "You sure you want me?" If this collection rep for the National Bank System called him by his right name in front of Bethel Knaught, it would kill his assignment. "I'm Billy Howlin of..."

"Yes, I know." Merriwell's little fingers clicked, shooting out a streamer of punch tape. "I hate, as you know, I hate, and Banx hates, to call on you out in the open, Mr. Howlin. However, you repeatedly..."

The lovely Bethel smiled, backing off. "Look me up in a while, Billy." She drifted off toward the revolving Mexican.

Gorman hadn't briefed Les on any debts. "I'm not sure I know what you mean." Les had only taken over Howlin's identity and home this morning.

"Well, Mr. Howlin, we let the first few bounce, figuring while you were in the Orient you might have lost your discretion for a time," said Merriwell. "Oh, go ahead and drink your drink. Don't mind me."

Les took the purple glass of vegetable juice from the robot. "You sure it's not a computer error?" That was what he'd always said to the Banx people before.

"Alas, no. You were $240,000 overdrawn," said Merriwell. "Now, that's not an awful lot, Mr. Howlin. However..."

"$240,000?"

"From your personal checking account," explained the Banx rep. "Now we, as authorized by the Banx Act of 1989, cleaned out your personal savings account and attached your salary at Forno, Inc....oh, by the way, I saw an interesting cassette of yours at a friend's the other evening. Involving an albino girl and a somewhat rare species of mountain..."

"My savings account? You mean that's cleaned out, too?"

"To cover some of the checks. We also went ahead, as empowered by the Federal Adjustments Act of 1993, and put another mortgage on your floating house in the Malibu Sector. Even so, and all things considered, you're still $74,000 short, and if you don't come up with it by next week, Banx will be forced to..."

"I know, I know. Sell my vehicles, my furnishings and then send me to Debtors Prison to work off the..."

"We already sold, acting under the Southern California Gores-Pronzini Repo Act of 1992, your hydroplane."

"The blue one? I hadn't noticed."

"I thought you might see the empty space at the dock."

"You know how it is when you're just back from the Orient, unpacking and all."

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"I never get to Asia. They don't let me chase deadbeats that far."

"Well, sir." Les put a firm hand on the Banx man's arm. "I'll be talking to my financial computers first thing tomorrow. We'll get this all settled then." He pivoted around the banking cyborg.

"I can only let you have another week to ten days at the most," Merriwell called after him.

The tall, almost willowy Bethel was over gazing up at the revolving Mexican picker. Les commenced hurrying toward her.

From out of the crowd a bulging glove came to poke into his midsection. "A moment of your time, crumb."

Les didn't know the stocky dark man in the fashionable linoleum suit. "Beg pardon?"

The fat glove jabbed him harder. "I got six different mitts I can screw into my wrist, crumb."

"This cyborg fad is really catching on."

"Today, under the glove, it's a 260 laser-blaster target pistol," said the man. "So it's best you settle up quiet."

"You figure to shoot me here in broad daylight at this fund-raising cocktail party for the Mechanized Mexican Pickers Union?"

"The 260 is silent. Only makes a hole the size of a pin prick."

Nodding, Les said, "Okay, how much is it I owe you?"

"Don't play dumb, crumb. There's $100,000 you lost at computer chess before you took off for the Orient. The andy horse bets you phoned in from over there add up to another $96,000. The accounting computers we got working for us say you can settle up for $190,000 flat. A bargain, owing to the fact these are Italian-made computers and programmed to be a little sentimental."

The lovely Knaught teleportation heiress was moving into the big multidomed mansion beyond the vast lawn. Les pulled his stomach back from the gloved hand. "Tomorrow morning," he said.

"Tomorrow morning what?"

"You'll have my personal check for the whole amount."

"Okay, we'll give you twenty-two hours."

"Twenty-four is customary."

"Don't bitch to me, ask the efficiency department." The gloved hand was withdrawn.

Les headed off after the willowy girl.

A week and a half later he called Hershey Gorman from Szczecin, Poland. The dapper little man appeared in jumbled fashion on the pixphone screen. "Your head's where your knee's supposed to be," Les told him.

"Oh, really? I must have the

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scrambler working cockeyed again. There, is that better?"

"Yeah, except your hair is green." Les buttoned the top button of his fleece-lined coat, leaned closer to the phone on his hotel coffee table.

"You look odd yourself, Les. Why are you so bundled up, are you calling from outdoors?"

"No, I'm in my room here at the Szczecin-Plaza. Heat costs extra and I'm trying to economize."

"Les, I told you, don't worry about the money," said Gorman. "Well, worry a little, since NSO does like to keep within its budgets on our various capers. Don't worry a lot, though."

"There was a guy waiting at the teleport depot here in Szczecin when I arrived yesterday," said Les, blowing his foggy breath on his mittened hands. "From some outfit called the International Credit Car Skiptracers, a branch of Interpol. I never even heard of them before, but it seems I owe them $122,000."

"Not you, Les, Billy Howlin."

"Me, him. It's me they hound," said Les. "Oh, one positive thing. Bethel is paying for my teleport trips now."

Gorman frowned. "Do you think that's the gentlemanly thing to do?"

"Do you know what it's cost me to court her and follow her around the world? First to Linkoping, Sweden, and then to Bromley, England, then over to Cordoba, Spain, then back to Linkoping again to look for a string of pearls she lost, then off to Jogjakarta, Indonesia, and...Christ, it's cost me $74,000 so far. Travel and accommodations."

"Relax, Les. It's not costing you anything. NSO is picking up all the tabs," Gorman assured him. "We've even settled all of Howlin's gambling debts."

"Does the Mafia have a branch here in Szczecin?" asked Les. "There's a guy with a tin arm who's been looking at me funny in the lobby."

"Don't let it unsettle you. We'll take care of any new and unexpected debts that arise."

"I wish you'd briefed me beforehand on what a financial deadbeat Howlin was. He's worse than I was even."

"We weren't aware of some of his debts, Les. The others...well, I didn't want you to worry in advance."

Les shook his head. "Boy, this assignment is really costing. I can't see why NSO wants to spend so much simply to plant a..."

"It's very important to national security, I explained all that to you," said his boss. "Now then, how are you progressing? It looks like the girl will be meeting with Tio Martelo in about seven days."

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Les slapped his hands together in his chill Polish room. "Well, we held hands in Cordoba. No, that was in Linkoping. Then over in Jogjakarta I kissed her good-night. I'm taking her dancing this evening. There's a robot swing band that's all the rage in Szczecin right now."

"You've only kissed her good-night so far?" asked the NSO man. "You used to work a little faster. Of course you've been out of action for almost..."

"I've got other things on my mind. All these people dunning me, Hersh."

"Les, they're not dunning you. They're dunning Howlin."

"Okay, okay," said Les. "Don't worry, I'll get the bug planted in plenty of time. Better hang up now so you won't run your bill up any further." He broke the connection.

It happened in Sydney, Australia. A day and a half before Bethel was due to have her meeting with the guerrilla leader in Brazil. After watching an afternoon airtennis match together, the lovely girl had invited Les to cocktails at the stilt villa she was renting on the outskirts of town.

"I'm making a concession," Bethel said, flicking on a silver-plated drink-mixing robot in her living room. "We've come to know each other so much better these past few days, Billy. And you've been so lovable about jaunting around with me while I look after the family business and all. Well, I know you must be tired of vegetable juice."

"Now that you mention it..."

"So I filled the bartender with gin." She crossed the bright room, put her hands on Les' shoulders, kissed him. "I don't know how long exactly I'll be in Brazil, and you can't come along this time. Let's have a going away celebration."

"Yes, let's." He kissed the lovely girl again.

Les managed to get the knockout drug into Bethel's third martini. When she awakened in the morning, she'd figure it was the unfamiliar gin that had put her to sleep.

He carried her into her bedroom, placed her carefully on the airfloat bed. From the little case he'd been carrying in a concealed pocket of his tunic he extracted the tiny bug. It was a new one, as Gorman had said. Didn't look like any monitor he had ever worked with. In under fifteen minutes he had the thing implanted.

After that he went back to sit in the living room. Les had turned off the bartending robot before drugging the girl's drink. He was thinking about turning it back on when the pixphone buzzed.

Les didn't answer it.

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A few minutes later a knocking sounded on the villa door.

From the communications outlet monitor in the ceiling, the door-answering mechanism announced, "It's a gentleman from the World Bank. He says Mr. Howlin's loan is past due and it must be paid at once or..."

Les got up, ran into the bedroom. He wrote a hurried farewell note to the sleeping girl. Then he went out on the balcony. It was nine feet to the sandy ground below. He jumped.

The Tenderloin cafeteria wanted five bucks for waffles and hash browns. Les walked out, heading for the Salvation Army cafe where you could get breakfast for $2.

"Back here again," said the voice of Hershey Gorman. "I thought maybe you would be."

It was a typical foggy Frisco morning. The dapper little NSO agent was blurred by the grey mist. "Good morning, Hersh," said Les.

"I've been hunting for you, since yesterday."

"Why? I did my job and reported same to your people." Les hadn't shaved since he'd teleported back from Sydney the day before yesterday. "Now I admit I did keep back a couple hundred bucks out of my expense money. I figure, though, NSO can afford it."

Catching up with him, Gorman reached up to put a hand on Les' shoulder. "Listen, Les. You did a great job on this assignment. I don't want you to drop back into this pattern of life again. Now, if you've heard anything which upset you, why I can try to..."

Les halted on the rutted street, asking, "Heard what?"

"Well, I figure you ran out on us because..."

"I came back here because nobody hassles me about my debts here," Les told him. "Outside that's all they think about."

Gorman was watching his bright boots. "Good, that's good, Les. I thought, since you might have grown fond of the girl..."

"What about Bethel?" he asked. "Hersh? That thing I planted on her...it was a bug, wasn't it?"

"Well," began the NSO agent. "Well, it was a new thing..."

Gripping the small man's arm, Les demanded, "Hersh, tell me what it was?"

"I told you this assignment was important. To the security of the United States, to the safety of all the Americas. If a man like Tio Martelo should seize control of Brazil, it will hurt us all."

"It was something to kill him? Wasn't it?"

"Yes," admitted Gorman. "A new kind of bomb."

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"A bomb? Christ, and I planted it on her. You stupid bastards, what..."

"Les, we're talking about the future of hundreds of millions of people. Okay, maybe I should have told you in front of the job. Still, the life of one girl isn't..."

Les shoved him aside. "She's not set to see him for a few hours. I can catch her at her hotel."

"I can't let you do that." Gorman started to reach inside his tunic.

Les hit him twice, once in the stomach and once on the jaw. As the NSO agent hit the sidewalk, Les jumped over him. There was a working phone stall two blocks away. He went running for it.

A weary-looking old man was sitting in there, sucking at a bubble of cough syrup.

Les grabbed him, dumping him out on the street. He closed himself in the stall and shoved a dollar into the money hole of the pixphone.

"Yes, sir?" said the smiling android girl who appeared on the saucer-size screen.

"I want to make a person-to-person call to Miss Bethel Knaught at the Statler-Horizonte Hotel in Belo Horizonte, Brazil."

"Very good, sir," smiled the girl andy. Her eyes clicked shut for a few seconds. Opening them again, she said, "Please deposit $174, sir."

"What?"

"That'll be $174, sir."

"174 bucks just to call Brazil?" Les stared at the little screen. "174 for one lousy phone call? Forget it."

He slammed out of the phone stall and walked away from it.

(F&SF competition, from page 160)

A World which has never known night
Is quite a remarkable sight.
One thing: there's no voice
To a sex-partner's choice
Of whether to turn out the light.
(*Nightfall* by Isaac Asimov)

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by August 10. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, *The Hugo Winners*, Vol. 2, Edited by Isaac Asimov (Doubleday $9.95). Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 6 will appear in the December issue.

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GREEN GROWS THE SOYLENT

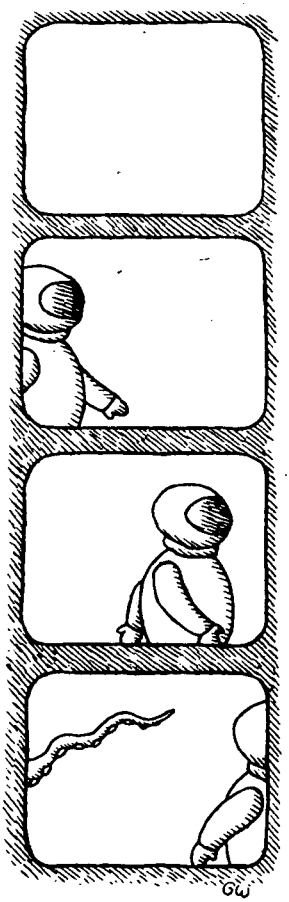
The title of *Soylent Green* (MGM) refers to a sort of artificial processed food on which, along with soylent red and soylent yellow, the population of 2022 exists. Now right away I am on the horns of a dilemma. I could tell you why the picture is so named, blow the ending, and spoil the fun of having you discover it for yourself. I feel most of the reviewers will do just that; I simply wish this column could be in time to warn you off reading about it. But remember—*you didn't read it here first.*

So edging delicately away from that point, I'll talk about what I can. The film is based on a novel by Harry Harrison. The world of 2022 is a disaster; the greenhouse effect has reduced much of the food supplies while the population continues to grow; New York City has 40,000,000 people. Services as well as food are nearly non-existent, and civilization is reduced to a curious mixture of basic social supply (water and soylent) plus might makes right.

The hero, Thorn (Charlton Heston) is a detective; murders are legion and nearly insolvable; one gets the impression he's only in it for what he can rip off from the victims' apartments. That's not so

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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reprehensible under the circumstances — it's a survival world. He is assigned to the murder of a VIP (who rates three nicely decorated rooms with hot water in a fortified enclave, not to mention a "furniture" girl who comes with the apartment...ladies' lib has gone down the drain with other social advances).

The plot is the search for the murderer and motive, with familiar aspects: involvement with the furniture girl (Leigh Taylor-Young), attempts by Thorn's superiors to close the case under him, the killing of a black priest to whom the VIP has confessed *something*. We, the audience, know *who* did it; the question is why, and that's what I'm not going to say.

There's much I admired about the film. Though it's thesis s-f, that's not *all* it is. The plot is of valid interest apart from the thesis, which I can't say for those other recent excursions into ecological s-f, "Silent Running" and "ZPG." While I could quibble with the set and costume designers (even with total disaster, there would have to be *some* design changes in 50 years), I find the direction admirable, particularly in the conception of what that kind of milieu would be. They have recreated a future New York on the model of contemporary Calcutta; every cranny and doorway has been rigged for some kind of shelter, and while the streets are empty at night because of a curfew, people live in parked cars (no longer used for transport, of course) and crowd into the interior stairs of every available building, usually guarded by one of their number who is armed. There is a wonderfully touching moment when Roth (Edward G. Robinson), a friend of Thorn's, goes to a voluntary suicide center. He is tenderly placed by himself in a room lit with his favorite color. As he dies, wall-to-wall films of the natural wonders of old Earth are projected. Thorn, watching through a window, weeps; he has never seen even pictures of what was. The cast is uniformly good; even Heston of the flintstone face brings the right quality to the role.

I hope the film achieves the popularity it deserves; not because it's saying things that should be said, but because it's saying them well and entertainingly. If it succeeds because of that, then maybe the people who should learn what it has to say *will* learn it.

On the homescreen front, Gene Roddenberry, who gave us a little series called "Startrek" a while back, came forth with a made-for-TVer called *Genesis II*. A NASA guinea pig, experimenting with suspended animation, awakes a

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little later than anticipated (A.D. 2133, to be exact) to find what's left of the world being fought over by a totalitarian type mutant culture against an underground (literally) human culture. If that sounds vaguely familiar, check your old Buck Rogers strips. But the comparison is unfair; basic plots are basic plots, and character, incident and dialogue were reminiscent, for me, of the most interesting of '40s s-f. I caught echoes of Heinlein, Shaver and Weinbaum's "The Black Flame" (yes, nit pickers, I know that's '30s), a particular kind of hard-core s-f that's been attempted seldom on film or TV. Even that implies a dated quality that I don't want to convey; production and effects were quite well done (though the mutants' major physical difference being a double navel I found a bit recherché) and I look forward to seeing it again on its inevitable rerun.

Late, late show dept...I feel as if this column has come of age; films that I reviewed on their initial theatrical release are now turning up on TV. I found "The Andromeda Strain" as slickly produced and suspenseful as initially, and "THX 1138" as impressive, particularly in its visual conceptions.

Things-to-come dept.....I've been sitting on an authentic scoop for some months and now that it's broken, it's suddenly iffy. Seems that the on-again, off-again filming of "Stranger in a Strange Land" (definitely on Warners' production schedule for last year, they said) was on again; it had been bought as a property for rock superstar David Bowie, a very workable combination, I think. But once the news broke, Bowie was having second thoughts. Maybe he's holding out for the lead in "I Will Fear No Evil" (a joke for those who know rock *and* s-f).

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"I got into this game too late to write for *Weird Tales*," writes Mr. Wagner. "Started writing about 1960, finally got to the point where I was spending more energy writing and reading in the sf/fantasy genre than I was giving to my medical studies (at the University of North Carolina). Encouraged by a couple book sales, I broke away to write full-time. Friends have called my approach 'acid gothic'. Maybe so — this story is gothic or schizophrenic as you see it."

In The Pines

by KARL EDWARD WAGNER

The road that climbed pine-hooded slopes was winding and narrow — treacherous with deep ruts and large stones. County work crews seldom came this far, and rains of many seasons had left the unpaved road with the contour of a dry stream bed.

In late afternoon sunlight the dusty Chevy bounced and rattled its cautious ascent of the pine-covered ridge. A rock outcropping struck its undercarriage and grated harshly. Janet caught her breath, but said nothing. Gerard Randall risked a quick glance from the wheel to note her tense fright. He scowled and concentrated on driving. Accustomed to wide, straight lanes of modern highway, Randall found this steep county road with its diabolical curves a nightmare. Rains had long since washed out whatever shoulder there was, and he watched in sick fascination as the road disappeared completely all too few inches from his jolting wheels.

"Can you see roads like this in Ohio!" he snorted, and wondered what would happen should two cars meet. With traffic almost nonexistent, that seemed unlikely. At any rate, he was barely crawling, as the light car wallowed over the rutted bed. Once again he felt a pang of regret for the Buick and its solid feel. But now life was strictly economy class.

The road made an impossible hairpin, so that Gerry had to stop the car to back and fill. He swore silently, keeping his anger to himself. What had this road been designed for anyway — didn't these Tennessee hillbillies drive cars! The

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long drive from Columbus had been difficult. From wide interstate highway, the roads had steadily retrogressed down the evolutionary ladder — until now he followed a trail Davy Crockett would have scorned.

Their silence had been awkward, but conversation was a greater strain. Instead, he turned up the radio and pretended not to notice Janet's tight-faced nervousness. For miles now the radio had blared out twangy country music from the small town stations along their route. When they left the paved road, it faded into static.

They were passing vacation cabins now, so he paid careful attention. "Help me find the place, Janet," he said levelly. "If we miss it, I'll never get turned around."

One of the last ones on the road, the agent in Maryville had told them when they stopped for the key. On the left, a good coat of green paint, with red fuel oil and water tanks in front. The sign over the door would read "The Crow's Nest" in red and white. Couldn't be missed.

"I hope it's...clean," Janet offered hesitantly. "Some of these look so run-down."

True enough, Gerry admitted. A few cabins were in good condition — fresh paint, aluminum screens, new car alongside. But most were half fallen apart — sagging wooden boxes perched on precarious stilts along the steep mountainside. A few had tumbled down the slope — pitiful heaps of crumpled and rotting timbers. Not encouraging. He voiced his annoyance : "So most of these places are fifty years old! What did you think 75 bucks a month would get you for a mountain cabin! In Gatlinburg we'd pay this much for a night!"

Her face drew tighter and her eyes looked damp. She was assuming her wounded martyr expression. Gerry braced himself for the now familiar crisis. *Please God, not now, not here.*

"There it is!" He pointed suddenly. "Let's see if there's room to pull off the road." Cautiously he edged the Chevy into a parking area beside the cabin.

Janet's face grew keen with interest. "It doesn't look too bad." she observed hopefully.

Gerry eyed the structure in quick appraisal. "No. No, it doesn't," he conceded. "At least from the outside."

The Crow's Nest was a typical mountain cabin from the early '20s, days when this had been a major resort area. It clung to the steep slope with one end resting on the bank just below the road, while an arrangement of wooden posts supported the sections jutting out from the mountain. Its unlovely design was that of a stack of boxes

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anchored to the ridge. The top floor — on level with the road — was a large square; underneath was a rectangle about two-thirds the width of the first, and the bottom floor was an even narrower rectangle. Rusty screen enclosed porches running the length of each level on the side overlooking the valley.

"Well, we can't complain about the view," Gerry offered. "There's three porches to choose from. Hope it's not too drafty for you. Well, come on. You can explore while I unload stuff."

Getting out, he gratefully stretched his long body, then reached in. "Make it OK?" he inquired solicitously. She pulled herself erect unsteadily, tugging hard on his arm and gripping the door with her other hand. Gerry unloaded her walker, then went to unlock the cabin while Janet hobbled painfully across the pine needle carpet to the door.

Inside she smiled. "Oh, Gerry! It looks so cozy! I know we'll be happy together here!"

"I hope so, darling!" he brightened.

The screen door slammed shut on squawling hinges.

Janet was exhausted and went to bed early. Gerry had not felt like sleep. The ordeal of driving had left his nerves on edge, and the strange surroundings made him restless. Instead he settled down in one of the huge rocking chairs, propped his feet on the edge of the porch screen and enjoyed the mountain night. Idly his fingers flicked the bottle caps nailed to the wide wooden armrests, while he thoughtfully nursed a Scotch and soda. He had brought several fifths down with him — the nearest liquor store would be Knoxville, and Tennessee liquor prices were terrible. He grimaced. Good Scotch was another luxury he could no longer afford.

The mountain breeze was cool and clean, and the night's silence astonished him. Dimly he could hear the whine, see the flicker of light as an occasional car passed along the highway in the valley far below. The house uttered soft groans and squeaks in the darkness, and the rocker answered with a rhythmic creak. From outside came the sounds of creatures of the forest night. Crickets, tree frogs, shrill insect calls. Mice, flying squirrels made soft rustlings in the quiet. An owl called from the distance, and a whipporwill. Overlying all was the whisper of the pines. Gerry had often heard the expression, but until now he had never understood that pines actually do whisper. Soft, soothing whisper in the night. But a sound so cold, so lonely.

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Even bad Scotch gets better with each drink. Maybe not Chivas Regal, but it does the job. Gerry rocked softly, sipped slowly glass after glass. The night was soothing. Tension slipped from overstrung nerves.

Half in dream he brooded over the turn his life had taken. God, it had all seemed so secure, settled. His wife, their son. A rising position with the firm. Good car, good house, good neighborhood. Country club, the right friends. Bright young man already halfway up the ladder to the top.

Then a woman's inattention, a flaming crash. Only a split second to destroy everything. The funeral, weeks of visits to the hospital. The lawsuit and its cruel joke of an insurance executive whose own policy was inadequate.

All of it destroyed. A comfortable well-ordered existence torn to twisted wreckage. He could never return to the old life. Despite the sincere best wishes of embarrassed friends, the concerned expressions of doctors who warned him about the emotional shock he had suffered.

Maybe it would have been best if he had been in the car, if he had died in the wreckage of his life.

No...that was a death wish. Part of the warnings of those concerned doctors after that scene in the hospital... Part of their reasons for urging this vacation upon him... "You both have scars that will have to heal..."

Gerry laughed softly at the memory of the psychiatrist's attempt to talk with him. In the stillness of the dark cabin his laughter was ghastly. He checked the bottle and noted it was almost empty. Drunk, by God. He supposed he should start bawling in his glass. Yes, Doctor, worry about me. Lose a little sleep in your $300,000 home. God knows how I've waited for the nights to end since then.

Time for bed. Try out that musty old mattress. He drew in a deep lungful of the mountain air. Curious fragrance he had not noticed before. Probably some mountain flower. Something that smelled like jasmine.

The cabin stairs were too treacherous for Janet, and so Gerry had to carry her — and then both nearly fell. But Janet insisted on exploring each drafty level of the old place as soon as the late breakfast was cleared. Hungover, Gerry reluctantly joined the game. Strange how frail she seemed in his arms — she had always been so solid. Maybe if she'd exercise her legs more, like the doctors had told her to do.

The cabin was in reasonable repair, but not much more. The

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floor sagged in places, and the roof showed signs of having leaked, but by and large everything seemed sound. Squirrels had slipped in and chewed up some of the furnishings. The furniture all was cheap, beat-up — caught in a limbo somewhere between antique and junk. None of it had captured the fancy of the countless prowlers who had broken in over the years. Disreputable iron-railed beds with collapsed springs and dirty mattresses, scarred tables and cheap dressers with many layers of paint, boxes and trunks of discarded items. A grimy bookshelf with several Edgar Wallace mysteries, a copy of Fox's *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, a Bible, odd volumes of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, other nondescript items. Janet delightedly pawed through each new trove, and Gerry became interested despite himself. He joined her laughter when one drawer yielded a bedraggled two-piece men's swimming costume.

The first level included the kitchen with its ancient appliances, two bedrooms, a bathroom with an old chemical toilet, and a large open area for dining or sitting. Below were two more bedrooms and a narrower open space along the screened front. The lowermost level was a narrow porch with several army bunks and a room at one end that had once been a bar. The insubstantial posts that supported the cabin were a good twelve feet high at the far end, so that there was a large dry storage area underneath. This had been stuffed with boxes and piles of junk not worth the effort of hauling away.

Here Gerry returned after a light lunch; Janet was tired and wanted to lie down. The disorder was fantastic — a clutter of discarded trivia decades old. Gerry had an appreciation for the cash value of an antique, and with a treasure hunter's enthusiasm he rummaged through the tottering stacks of lost years.

More junk than any attic would attempt. Broken chairs, cracked dishes, boxes of Mason jars, heaps of newspapers, rusty tools, old tires, a wheelless bicycle, fishing poles. Anything. Doggedly he worked his way from pile to pile, covered with a paste of sweat, red dust and spider web. Once he found a scorpion under a wooden box and remembered that black widow spiders, too, liked these places. Maybe there were snakes. But he paid no more attention to such misgivings than to the dirt — although a year ago he would not have braved either just to rifle through old junk.

It had been profitable so far. He had pulled out a tool chest, in case he felt up to making repairs. There

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was a stack of crumbling pulp magazines — *Argosy, Black Mask, Doc Savage, Weird Tales* and others — that would provide a few laughs. A crockery jug — just like the moonshine jugs in the cartoons — would make a nice lamp. An old copper lantern might be a nice antique, along with the cane-bottomed chair. Some of these picture frames might be valuable...

He stopped. Against one post leaned a stack of old pictures — mostly mountain scenes and calendar cutouts behind glass opaque with dirt. But as he shuffled through them, one picture suddenly caught his eye.

It was an original oil painting, he saw on closer examination, and did not look quite finished. For a moment he remembered stories of undiscovered masterpieces, but laughed the thought aside. Carefully he blew away loose dust. Sandwiched between several larger frames, the canvas was undamaged. Critically he held it to the yellow sunlight.

The picture caught him — drew his attention in a manner he had never experienced. Inexplicable. Art had never meant anything to him, aside from a few tasteful reproductions dutifully purchased to fill wall space.

A woman's portrait, nothing more. Curiously blurred, as if the oils were somewhat translucent. Was it unfinished — or was it an attempt at impressionism? She wore a simple green frock — a light summer outfit stylish in the '20s. Her auburn hair was cut in the short bob popular then. Almost in keeping with the latest styles, but for an indefinable air that proclaimed an older period.

It was a lonely picture. She stood against a background of dark pines, cold and lonely about her. There was a delicacy about her and, illogically, an impression of strength. The face was difficult, its mood seeming altered at each glance. Indefinable. Sensuous mouth — did it smile or was there sorrow? Perhaps half open in anticipation of a kiss — or a cry? The eyes — soft blue or did they glow? Did they express longing, pain? Or were they hungry eyes, eyes alight with triumph? Lonely eyes. Lonely face. A lonely picture.

A song, long forgotten, came to his mind.

In the pines, in the pines,
Where the sun never shines,
And I shiver when the wind blows cold...

He did shiver then. Sun falling, the mountain wind blew cold through the pines. How long had he been staring at the portrait?

Struck with a chill beyond that of the wind, Gerry cradled his find in cautious hands and started back up the dusty bank.

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Janet was in a cheerful mood for a change. Not even a complaint about being ignored most of the afternoon. "Well, let's see what goodies you've brought up from the basement," she laughed, and glanced at the picture, "Oh, there's Twiggy! Gerry, how camp! Look — an original piece of nostalgia!"

He frowned, suddenly offended by her gaiety. In view of the profound impression the picture had made, laughter seemed irreverent. "I thought it was kind of nice myself. Thought I'd hang it up maybe. Can't you just feel the loneliness of it?"

She gave him a hopeless look. "Oh, wow, you're serious. Hang that old thing up? Gerry, you're kidding. Look how silly she looks."

He glanced at her prefaded bell-bottoms and tank top. "Maybe that will look silly in a few years too."

"Hmmm? I thought you liked these?" She inspected herself in faint concern, wondering if she had gotten too thin. No, Gerry was just being pettish.

"Well, let me take a good look at your treasure." She studied the picture with a professional attitude. On Tuesday afternoons she had taken art lessons along with several of her friends. "The artist is really just too romantic. See — no expression, no depth to his subject. Pale girl against dark woods — it's corny. Too much background for a portrait, and that dress dates it too severely to be idealized — not even a good landscape. His greens are overused and too obvious. His light is all wrong, and there's certainly no imagination with all those dark colors. Is it supposed to be night or day?"

Gerry bit his lip in annoyance. Snotty little dilettante. He wished he knew enough about art to tear apart her prattling criticism.

"This is pretty typical of the sort of maudlin trash they turned out in the '20s. Probably some amateur on vacation here did it of his girl friend, and she had enough taste to leave it behind. Let's see — it's signed here on the corner. E. Pittman...1951. 1951? That's funny..." she finished awkwardly.

Gerry's mustache twitched sarcastically. "And when did they make you valedictorian of your art class? That gossip session where bored housewives can splash on gobs of paint and call it a subtle interplay of neo-garbage."

That stung. "Oh, stop sulking. So I insulted your male ego because I don't care for your little Twiggy-of-the-woods."

"Because you're too damned insensitive to get into the mood of this painting!" Why had she gotten him so riled over an old picture? "Because you don't feel the..." *Damn!* How do art critics choose

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their phrases! "Because you're jealous over a portrait of a beautiful woman!" *What the hell sense did that make?*

"You're not hanging that piece of junk up here!" Now she was mad at him. Her lips made a white line across her blonde face.

"No! No, I'm not! Not where you can sneer at her! I'll hang her up downstairs!"

"Way downstairs, I hope!" she shouted after him, close to tears now. And things had been going so well...

Dinner had been awkward. Both sheepish but sulking, apologies meant but left unspoken, quarrels ignored but not forgotten. He left her fiddling with the portable TV afterward, making the excuse that he wanted to read without distraction.

Downstairs he had replenished the old bar. The portrait hung against the wall, watching him. In cleaning it, he had noticed the name "Renee" scrawled at the top. Maybe the artist's name — no, that was E. Pittman. Probably the title then. Name suited her well. "Mind if I have a drink, Renee?" he murmured. "Wife says I have a few too many a bit too often. Cliche for the day: Bitter hero drowns his grief in booze." The eyes stared back at him. In pity? Loneliness? Hunger? How lost she looked!

Gerry flipped on a lopsided floor lamp and settled down to read some of the pulps he had resurrected. God, how ingenuous the stuff was! Were people ever so naive? He wondered how James Bond would appear to readers back then.

Bugs slipped through the rusty screen and swarmed to the light. Buzzed through his ears, plopped on the pages, fell in his drink. In vexation he finally clicked the lamp off.

His gaze was drawn back to the portrait, visible through the darkness by the glow of the bar light. He considered it with the careful patience four double shots of Scotch can bestow. Who was she, this Renee? She seemed too real to be only an artist's imagination, but it was curious that an artist of the '50s should paint a girl of the '20s. Had she once sat here on this porch and listened to this same wind? This cold, lonesome wind in the pines?

God. Getting sentimental from Scotch. Mellow over a painting that a few months back he'd have laughed at. He closed his eyes wearily and concentrated on the night, letting its ancient spell wash over him.

The cool, velvet soft night. Pines whispering in the darkness. The sound of loneliness. And Gerry realized he had become a very

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lonely man. A lost soul — adrift in the darkness of the pines.

Again came the faint scent of jasmine, haunting perfume. Jasmine, antique like this cabin. Worn by enchantresses of another age. Fragrance lingering from dead years. Delicate floral scent worn when beauty was caressed by silken gowns, garlanded with pearls, glinted with lacquered nails. Gone now, vanquished by synthetics. Today a woman clothed, adorned, perfumed herself with coal tar and cellulose. No wonder femininity had declined.

He breathed the rare fragrance, the cool night, somewhere between waking and dreaming. Faintly he heard the rustle of silk beside him, a sound separate from the whisper of the pines. A cold breath on his neck, apart from the mountain breeze. Like the elusive scent of jasmine, sensations alien to the night, yet part of it. The wind brushed his dark hair, stroked his damp forehead, almost as if a cool, delicate hand soothed the lines of pain.

He sighed, almost a shudder. Tension softened, days of anguish lost their sting. A feeling of inexpressible contentment stole over him; anticipation of ecstasy came to him. He parted his lips in a smile of dreamy delight.

"Renee." The sigh escaped him unbidden. It seemed that another's lips hovered close to his own. Sleep came to him then.

The sign announced "Pennybacker's Grocery — Drink Coca-Cola". Maryville had modern supermarkets, and ordinarily Gerry would have driven the extra distance. But today the country grocery with its old-fashioned general store atmosphere appealed to him — and it *was* close-by.

The building was old. In front stood two battered gas pumps of some local brand. A long peaked roof overhung to form a sheltered enclosure between gas pumps and store front. Two wooden benches guarded the doorway. Their engraved invitation to "Drink Royal Crown Cola" was almost obliterated by countless carved initials and years of friction from overalls. The paint was starting to peel, and the windows were none too clean. Rusty advertising signs and a year's growth of posters made a faded patchwork of the exterior.

Inside was packed more merchandise than there seemed floor-space for. Strange brands abounded on the crowded shelves. Fresh produce from local farms stood in open baskets. Cuts of meat were displayed within a glass counter. Odd items of hardware, clothing, medicines, tackle augmented the fantastic clutter. Here was a true

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general store without the artificial quaintness of the counterfeit "country stores" of Gatlinburg's tourist traps.

Grocery buying was something of an adventure, and Gerry was glad Janet had not come along to quarrel over selections. A display of knives caught his eye as he waited for the proprietor to total his purchases on a clattering adding machine. Among the other pocket knives, he recognized the familiar shape of a Barlow knife.

"Is that a real Barlow or a Japanese copy?" he asked.

The storekeeper looked up sharply. "No, sir! Those knives are every one made in America. For your real quality knife you want your American one every time — though there's some likes the German. Take them case knives there. Now you can't ask for a better knife. Lots of folks swear by a case knife. Now that Barlow's a fine one too. It's a Camillus, and as fine a knife as any you could've bought fifty years ago. Cost you just four bucks. Want to see one?"

Gerry tossed the stubby knife in his palm and decided to buy it. He had never carried a penknife, and this one was too bulky for his pockets. Still, a good souvenir. The storekeeper was disposed to talk, and the knife led to a rambling conversation.

Lonzo Pennybacker had run this store since the Depression. His uncle had built the place about the time of the Great War, and the gas pumps were some of the first in the area. Lonzo was interested to learn that Gerry was from Columbus — two of his cousins had families up around there, although he supposed Gerry wouldn't know them. No, Gerry guessed he didn't.

Lonzo's expression was peculiar when Gerry mentioned he had rented The Crow's Nest. "So they've got somebody to stay in the old Reagan place again," he reflected.

"Oh?" Gerry's bushy eyebrows rose. "Why do you say that? Is the place haunted or something?"

Pennybacker scratched his pointed chin pensively. "Hants? No — don't think you can say that rightly. Far's I know, nobody's ever seen no hants around the old Reagan place. If it's hants now, you could've seen as many as you'd care in the old Griffin house. Everybody knew it was for sure hanted. Course it burned down in '61.

"No. Far's I know the Reagan place ain't hanted. It's just what they call unlucky."

"Unlucky? How do you mean that?" Gerry wondered if he should laugh.

Lonzo finished packing the groceries before answering. "Well, sir, I was just through schoolin' back in '22 when David Reagan

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built The Crow's Nest. He was a mineowner out of Greenville and a wealthy man as we counted them in those days. Built the place as a honeymoon cabin for him and his wife. Fine handsome young lady, I can remember. She was maybe twenty years younger than David Reagan — he being in his forties and sort of stout. Renee though was a mighty prettysome girl."

"Renee?"

"Renee. That was her name. Quite a looker. Wore her hair bobbed and those short dresses and all. A real flapper. Women around here was scandalized with all her city ways and manners. Men though liked her well enough, I'll tell you. Red hair and the devil in her blue eyes. Used to draw a regular crowd down at the hotel swimming pool when she'd come down.

"Well, she liked it here in the mountains; so they spent the summers here. Back then this area was pretty lively. Tourists came from all over to spend their vacations here. Used to be some big fancy resort hotels and all the cottages too. Yeah, this place was real busy back before they opened the park.

"Well, Renee was a little too much woman for David Reagan, they said. Anyway, summer of 1925 she took up with one of the tourists — good-looking fellow name of Sam Luttle, staying the summer at a resort hotel hear here. Far as anyone can say, David Reagan must've found about them — you know how gossip gets around. So one day Renee just plain vanished. And before anyone really noticed she was missing, David Reagan one night drove his Packard off the side of the mountain. Remember seeing that one. Threw him through the windshield, and his head was just about cut loose.

"When Renee didn't show up, they got to searching for her. But nothing ever did turn up of that girl. Disappeared without a trace. Since David Reagan was known to have a mean temper and a jealous streak besides, folks sort of figured he'd found out about his wife and Sam Luttle, and so he'd killed Renee and hid her body out somewhere in the mountains. All that pine forest — they never could find her.

"Some figured maybe she'd run off with Luttle, but he claimed he didn't know a thing, Anyway, he got chewed up by a bear out walking one night not long afterwards. So there wasn't nobody left who knew anything about the business. David Reagan had a brother who sold the cabin, and it's been passed around and rented ever since."

"And have there been stories since then of ghosts or something in

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connection with the place?" Somehow the idea did not seem as absurd as it should have.

"No, can't say there has," acknowledged Lonzo, his expression guarded. "Not much of anything unusual gone on at the Reagan place. Nobody's ever cared to keep the place for too long for one reason or another. Still the only thing you might call mysterious was that artist fellow back in the early '50s."

"Artist? What about him?"

"Some New York fellow. Had some disease, I think. Kind of strange — crazy in the head, you could say maybe. Anyway, he killed himself after living there a few weeks. Cut his throat with a razor, and they didn't find him for a week. Had trouble renting the place for a while after that, you can guess. Fellow's name was — let's see. Enser Pittman."

Janet seemed disgustingly solicitous during dinner, going out of her way to avoid mention of Gerry's long absence that afternoon. She had fixed Swiss steak — one of his favorites — and her eyes were reproachful when he gave curt, noncommittal answers to her attempts at conversation. If only she wouldn't be so overbearing in her attempts to please him, Gerry thought, then act like a whipped dog when he didn't respond effusively.

Dutifully he helped her clear away the dishes — even dried while she washed. Afterward she offered to play gin rummy, but he knew she really didn't like the game and declined. Conversation grew more dismal, and when Janet seemed disposed to get romantic, he turned on the TV. Presently he lamely mentioned paper work and left Janet protesting her loneliness. He thought she was crying again, and the familiar flash of anger returned as he descended the precipitous stairs. Anyway, she'd perk up for the Doris Day flick.

Drink in hand, Gerry once again studied the strange painting which had captured his imagination. E. Pittman — 1951. Enser Pittman who had once stayed here. And committed suicide. Artists were never stable types.

But why had he painted a woman dressed in the fashion of a quarter of a century previous? *Renee.* Gerry felt certain that this Rénee was the unfortunate Renee Reagan who had probably been murdered by her jealous husband in this cabin years before.

Of course! Pittman had discovered an old photograph. Certainly he would have learned of the cabin's tragic past, and the photograph of the murdered woman would have appealed to his

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artistic imagination. A mind on the brink of suicide would have found sick gratification in the portrayal of a murdered temptress from a decadent period like the '20s.

She *was* a beautiful creature. It was easy to see how much beauty could drive a man to adultery — or murder. Easy to understand why Pittman had been fascinated as an artist.

Moodily he stared at the painting. She was so vital. Pittman must have indeed been talented to incarnate such life within the oils. Strange how her eyes looked into your own. Her smile. If you looked long enough, you could imagine her lips moved, her eyes followed you. Amazing that he had painted it from only a photograph.

She would have been easy to love. Mysterious. Not a shallow housewife like Janet. Strange how things had changed. Once he had loved Janet because she was a perfect housewife and mother. A woman like Renee he would have considered dangerous, trivial — desirable perhaps, like a film sex goddess, but not the type to love. So old values can change.

And Gerry realized he no longer loved his wife.

Bitterness flooded his mind. Guilt? Should he feel guilty for treating Janet so callously? Was it wrong to be unforgiving over an accident, a simple accident that...

"You killed my son!" he choked. Tears of rage, of pain blinded his eyes. With a sob, Gerry whirled from the painting and flung his empty glass through the doorway of the bar.

He froze — never hearing his glass rip through the rusty veranda screen and shatter against a tree below.

Renee. She was standing in the doorway.

Only for a second did the image last. For an instant he clearly saw her standing before him, watching him from the darkness of the doorway. She was just like her picture: green summer frock, bobbed flame hair, eyes alight with longing, mouth half open in invitation.

Then as his heart stuttered at the vision, she vanished.

Gerry let out his breath with a long exclamation and sank onto a chair. Had he seen a ghost? Had they started bottling LSD with Scotch? He laughed shakily. An afterimage, of course. He'd been staring at the painting for an hour. When he had abruptly looked away against the darkened doorway, the image of the painting had superimposed on his retina. Certainly! They'd done experiments like that in college science.

It *had* been unnerving for a second. So that was how haunted houses got their reputation. He

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glanced about him. The porch was deserted, of course. The wind still whispered its cold breath through the rhythmically swaying pines. Again came a faint scent of jasmine on the night wind. God! It was so peaceful here! So cold and lonely! He closed his eyes and shivered, unreasonably content for the moment. Like being alone with someone you love very much. Just the two of you and the night.

"Gerry! For God's sake, are you all right!"

He catapulted out of the rocker. "What! What? Of course I am! Damn it all, stop screaming! What's wrong with you?"

Janet was at the top of the staircase. She called down half in relief, half in alarm. "Well, I heard a glass smash and you didn't answer when I called you at first. I was afraid you'd fallen or something and were maybe hurt. I was about to start down these steps, if you hadn't answered."

Gerry groaned and said with ponderous patience, "Well, I'm all right, thank you. Just dropped a glass. Turn down the television next time, and maybe I'll hear you."

"The TV's off." (So that was why she took time to think of him.) "It's started acting crazy again like last night. Can you take a look at it now? It always seems to work OK in the daytime."

She paused and sniffed loudly. "Gerry, do you smell something?"

"Just mountain flowers. Why?"

"No, I mean do you smell something rotten? Can't you smell it? I've noticed it several times at night. It smells like something dead is in the cabin."

Gerry had been trying to move an old trunk when he found the diary. The rusty footlocker had been shoved into one of the closets upstairs, and Janet insisted that he lug the battered eyesore downstairs. Gerry grumbled while dragging the heavy locker to the stairs, but its lock was rusted tight, and he was not able to remove the junk inside first. So it was with grim amusement that he watched the trunk slip from his grasp and careen down the narrow stairs. At the bottom it burst open like a rotten melon and dumped its musty contents across the floor.

Clothes and books mostly. A squirrel had chewed entrance at one point and shredded most of it, while mildew had ruined the remainder. Gerry righted the broken trunk and carelessly tossed the scattered trash back inside. Let someone else decide what to do with it.

There was a leather-bound notebook. Its cover was thrown back, and he noted the title page: *Diary. Enser Pittman. June-De-*

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cember, 1951. Gerry looked at the footlocker in alarm. Were these the possessions of that artist, left unclaimed after his suicide?

He set the diary aside until he had cleared away the rest of the debris. Then he succumbed to morbid curiosity and sat down to thumb through the artist's journal. Some of the pages had been chewed away, others were welded together with mold and crumbled as he tried to separate them. But he could read enough to fasten his attention to the tattered diary.

The first few entries were not especially interesting — mostly gloomy comments on the war in Korea and the witch hunts at home, the stupidity of his agent, and what a bitch Arlene was. On June 27, Pittman had arrived at The Crow's Nest for a rest and to try his hand at mountainscapes. From that point certain passages of the diary assumed a chilling fascination for him.

June 28. Went out for a stroll through the woods today, surprisingly without getting lost or eaten by bears. Splendid pine forest! After NY's hollow sterile canyons, this is fantastic! God! How strange to be alone! I walked for hours without seeing a soul — or a human. And the carpet of pine needles — so unlike that interminable asphalt-concrete desert! Pure desolation! I feel reborn! Extraordinary these pines. Can't recall any sound so lonely as the wind whispering through their branches. Weird! After NY's incessant mind-rotting clamor. If I can only express this solitude, this unearthly loneliness on canvas! Fahler is an odious cretin! Landscapes are not trite — rather the expression has cloyed....

*June 30...*Haven't found those flowers yet. Guess the night breeze carries the scent a long way. Didn't know jasmine grew here. Weird. At nights it almost feels like a woman's perfume...

*July 2...*The horns are growing. Several times at night now I've definitely sensed a woman's presence in the darkness. Strange how my imagination can almost give substance to shadow. I can almost make myself visualize her just at the corner of my vision...

July 4. Wow! Too much wine of the gods, Enser! Last time I get patriotic! A little excess of Chianti to celebrate the glorious 4th, I drop off in my chair, and Jesus! Wake up to see a girl bending over me! Nice trick too! Looked like something out of a Held illustration! Vanished about the time my eyes could focus. Wonder what Freud would say to that!...

*July 7...*Either this place is haunted, or I'm going to have to go looking for that proverbial farmer's daughter. Last night I woke up with

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the distinct impression that there was a woman in bed beside me. Scared? Christ! Like a childhood nightmare! I was actually afraid to reach over — even turn my head to look — and find out if someone was really there. When I finally did check — nothing, of course — I almost imagined I could see a depression on the mattress. The old grey matter is starting to short out...

(The next several pages were too mutilated to decipher, and Gerry pieced together the rest only with extreme difficulty.)

...seems to know the whole story, tho it's hard to say how much the good reverend doth impart. Banner's a real character — strictly old-time evangelist. Mostly the same story as Pennybacker's and the other loafers — except Rev. Banner seems to have known Luttle somewhat. Renee was a "woman of Satan," but to him doubtless any "fancy city woman" would reek of sin and godlessness. Anyway his version is that she married Reagan for the bread, but planned to keep her hand in all the same. She seduced Sam Luttle and drove him from the path of righteousness into the morass of sinfulness and adultery. In Banner's opinion Renee only got... (half a page missing)...no trace of Renee's body was every discovered. Still it was assumed Reagan had murdered her, since she never turned up again in Greenville or anywhere else — and Reagan seemed definitely to have been on the run when he drove off the mountain. Here Banner gets a bit vague, and its hard to tell if he's just getting theatrical. Still he insists that when they found Reagan with his throat guillotined by the windshield, there wasn't a tenth as much blood spilled about the body as would be expected. Same regarding Luttle's death. Superficial scratches except the torn throat, and only a small pool of blood. Banner doesn't believe the bear explanation, but I don't get what...

(pages missing)

...know whether my mind is going or whether this cabin is actually haunted.

July 15. I saw her again last night. This time she was standing at the edge of the pines beyond the front door — seemed to be looking at me. The image lasted maybe 15-20 seconds this time, long enough to get a good look. She's a perfect likeness of the description of Renee. This is really getting bizarre! I'm not quite sure whether I should be frightened or fascinated. I wonder why there haven't been any other reports of this place being haunted...

July 16. I've started to paint her. Wonder what Fahler will say to a portrait of a ghost. It's getting

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easier now to see her, and she stays visible longer too — maybe she's getting accustomed to me. God — I keep thinking of that old ghost story, The Beckoning Fair One! Hope this won't...

July 17. I find I can concentrate on Renee at nights now, and she appears more readily — more substantial. Painting is progressing well. She seems interested. Think I'll try to talk with her next. Still unsure whether this is psychic phenomenon or paranoid hallucination. We'll see — meanwhile damned if Enser will let anyone else in on this. Tho aren't artists supposed to be mad?

July 18. Decided to use the pines for background. Took a long walk this afternoon. Strange to think that Renee probably lies in an unmarked grave somewhere under this carpet of pine needles. Lonely grave — no wonder she doesn't rest. She smiles when she comes to me. My little spirit remained all of 5-6 minutes last night. Tonight...

(pages missing)

...to no one other than myself, and I think I understand. This goes back to something Bok once talked about. Spirits inhabit a plane other than our own — another dimension, say. Most spirits and most mortals are firmly anchored to their separate worlds. Exceptions exist. Certain spirits retain some ties with this world. Renee presumably because of her violent death, secret grave — who knows? The artist also is less firmly linked to this humdrum mortal plane — his creativity, his imagination transcends the normal world. Then I am more sensitive to manifestations of another plane than others; Renee is more readily perceived than other spirits. Result: Our favorite insane artist sees ghosts where countless dullards slept soundly. By this line of reasoning anyone can become a bona fide jr. ghostwatcher, if something occurs to make him more susceptible to their manifestations. Madmen, psychic adepts, the dying, those close to the deceased, those who have been torn loose from their normal life pattern...

...for maybe half the night. I think I'm falling in love with her. Talk about the ultimate in necrophilia!

July 26. The painting is almost complete. Last night she stayed with me almost until dawn. She seems far more substantial now — too substantial for a ghost. Wonder if I'm just getting more adept at perceiving her, or whether Renee is growing more substantial with my belief in her...

July 27. She wanted me to follow her last night. I walked maybe a mile through the dark pines before my nerve failed. Maybe she was taking me to her

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grave. It's auditory now: Last night I heard her footsteps. I'll swear she leaves tracks in the dust, leaves an impression on the cushions when she sits. She watches me, listens — only no words yet. Maybe tonight she'll speak. She smiles when I tell her I love her.

July 28. I swear I heard her speak! Renee said she loved me! She wants me to return her love! Only a few words — just before she disappeared into the pines. And she seemed as substantial as any living girl! Either I'm hopelessly insane, or I'm on the verge of an unthinkable psychic discovery! Tonight I'm going to know for certain. Tonight I'm going to touch Renee. I'm going to hold her in my arms and not let her go until I know whether I'm mad, the victim of an incredible hoax, or a man in love with a ghost!

It was the last entry.

Lonzo Pennybacker gave directions to the house of the elderly Baptist preacher. Eventually Gerry found the right dirt road and drove up to a well-kept house at the head of a mountain cove. Flowers bloomed in the yard, and dogs were having a melee with a pack of noisy children. The house presented a clean, honest front — a far cry from the squalor Gerry had expected in a mountain home.

Rev. Billy Banner sat in a porch rocker and rose to meet Gerry. He was an alert man in his seventies or better, lean and strong without a trace of weakness or senility. His eyes were clear and his voice still carried the deep intonations that had rained hellfire and damnation on his congregation for decades.

After shaking hands, Banner motioned him to a chair, politely waited for his guest to come to business. This was difficult. Gerry was uncertain what questions to ask, what explanations to offer — or what he really wanted to find out. But Banner sensed his uneasiness and expertly drew from him the reason for his visit. Gerry explained he was staying at the old Reagan cabin, that he was interested in the artist Enser Pittman who had killed himself there.

"Enser Pittman?" The old man nodded. "Yes, I remember him well enough. He paid me a visit once, just like you today. Maybe for the same reason."

Plunging on, Gerry asked about the history of the cabin and was told little he had not already learned. Rev. Banner spoke with reluctance of the old tragedy, seemed to suspect more than he was willing to put into words.

"Do you have any idea what might have driven Pittman to suicide?" Gerry asked finally.

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The preacher kept silent until Gerry wondered if he would ignore the question. "Suicide? That was the verdict, sure enough. They found him mother-naked in bed, his throat tore open and a razor beside him. Been dead a few days — likely it had been done the last of July. No sign of struggle, nothing gone, no enemies. Artists are kind of funny anyway. And some claimed he had cancer. So maybe it was suicide like the coroner said. Maybe not. Wasn't much blood on the sheets for a man to be cut like that, they tell me. All the same, I hope it was suicide, and not something worse."

"I thought suicide was the unforgivable sin."

"There's things worse." Banner looked at him shrewdly. "Maybe you know what I mean. The Bible talks about witches and ghosts and a lot of other things we think we're too wise to believe in today. That Renee Reagan was a daughter of Satan, sure as I'm sitting here remembering her. Well, I'm an old man, but no one's ever called me an old fool; so I'll just stop talking."

Feeling uncomfortable without knowing why, Gerry thanked the preacher and rose to go. Rev. Banner stood up to see him off, then laid a sinewy hand on his shoulder at the edge of the porch.

"I don't know just what sort of trouble you got that's bothering you, son," he began, fixing Gerry with his keen eyes. "But I do know there's something about the old Reagan place that gets to some kinds of people. If that's the way it is with you, then you better get back to where it is you come from. And if you do stay on here, then just remember that Evil can't harm a righteous man so long as he denies its power and holds to the way of Our Lord Jesus Christ and his Gospel. But once you accept Evil — once you let Evil into your life and permit its power to influence your soul — then it's got you body and soul, and you're only a plaything for all the devils of Hell!

"You've got that lost look about you, son. Maybe you can hear that Hell-bound train a-calling to you. But don't you listen to its call. Son, don't you climb on board!"

With a strange mixture of dread and anticipation, Gerry broke away from Janet's mawkish attempts to make conversation and retired to the lower veranda for the evening. All afternoon he had thought about returning to Columbus, forgetting this mystery. Yet he knew he could not. For one thing, he had to stay until he could be certain of his own sanity. Barring madness, this entire uncanny business must be either hoax or genuine. If it were an elaborate hoax, Gerry wanted to

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know who, how and why. And if the cabin were haunted... He *had* to know.

But it was deeper than the simple desire to explore an occult phenomenon. Renee — whoever, whatever she might be — held a profound fascination for him. Her image obsessed him. He thought of this passionate, exotic woman of another era; then there was Janet. Bitterness returned, and again the memory of the son and the ordered world her moronic carelessness had torn from him. Right now she was sitting like a mushroom, spell-bound by that boobtube, never a concern for her husband's misery.

His thoughts were of Renee when sleep overcame him. In dream he saw her drift through the screen door and greet him with a red-lipped smile. She was so vivacious, so desirable! Pittman's painting had held only the shadow of her feline beauty.

Gracefully she poured two fingers of Gerry's Scotch and tossed it down neat, eyes wide with devilish challenge. Bringing the bottle with her, she took the chair beside his own. Her long fingers cozily touched his arm. "Nice of you to offer a lady a drink," she grinned impishly. "Good Scotch is so hard to get now. Been saving this stuff in your cellar since before Volstead — or is this just off the boat?"

"Oh, the Prohibition's been repealed for years now," Gerry heard himself say dully, as in a dream. It was a dream. Renee cast no reflection in the barroom mirror.

"Sure honey." She laughed teasingly. "Say, lover — you look all down in the dumps tonight. Care to tell a girl all about it?"

And Gerry began to tell Renee the story of his life. As the night grew deeper, he told her of his struggle to become successful in his work, his efforts to build a position for himself in society, his marriage to a woman who couldn't understand him, his son for whom he had hoped everything, Janet's accident and the death of all his aspirations. Quietly she listened to him, eyes intent with sympathy. God! Why couldn't Janet ever show such feeling, such interest! Always too busy feeling sorry for herself!

When he finished, mechanical sobs shook his angular frame. Renee expressed a wordless cry of concern and laid a white arm around his shoulder. "Hey, c'mon now, Gerry! Get it all out of your system! You've really had a tough break or too, but we can work it out now, can't we! Here now — think about this instead!"

She slithered onto his lap and captured his lips in a long kiss.

Somewhere in the kiss Gerry opened his eyes. With a gasp he

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started from his chair. No one was there, of course.

God! What a dream! His lips felt bruised, unnaturally cold — even her kiss had felt real. Got to go easy on the bottle. Still if this was DT's, it was pleasant enough. God! Had he ever carried on! That psychiatrist would have had a picnic. He reached for the Scotch. Empty. Had he had that much to drink? No wonder the dream

Was it a dream? Gerry looked about him suspiciously. The chair beside him seemed maybe closer, although he really hadn't noticed it earlier. An empty glass on the floor — but maybe he'd left it there before. That peculiar scent of jasmine again — wonder what perfume Renee had worn? Absurd — it was mountain flowers.

He touched his lips and there was blood on his fingers.

"I'm going out for a walk," he told Janet after breakfast.

"Can't you stay around here today for a change?" she asked wistfully. "Or let's go someplace together. You've been off so much lately, I hardly get to see you. And it's so lonely here without anyone around."

"Without a phone to gossip with all the bitches in your bridge club," he snapped. "Well, I'm not sitting on my ass all afternoon watching television. If you want company, then walk along with me!"

"Gerry," she began shakily. "You know I can't..."

"No, I don't know! The doctors say you can walk whenever you want to! You're just so content playing the invalid, you won't even try to walk again!"

Her eyes clouded. "Gerry! That was cruel!"

"The truth though, wasn't it!" he exploded. "Well, damn it, snap out of it! I'm getting disgusted with waiting on you hand and foot — tying myself down to someone who can't stop feeling sorry for herself long enough to..."

"Gerry!" Janet clenched her fists. "Stop it! What's happening to us! For the last several days you've been getting ever sharper with me! You shun me — avoid my company like you hated me! For God's sake, Gerry, what *is* the matter!"

He turned from her in wordless contempt and strode off into the pine forest. She called after him until he was beyond earshot.

The pines! How restful they were after her miserable whimpering! The dense shade, the deep carpet of fallen needles choked out undergrowth. The dark, straight trunks stabbed toward the sunlight above, leaving a rough shaft branchless for dozens of feet. It was so pleasant to walk among them. The needles were a resilient carpet

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that deadened all sound. The trunks were myriad pillars to support a vaulted ceiling of swaying green boughs.

It was eerie here in the pines. So unlike a hardwood forest, alive with crackling leaves and a wild variety of trees and underbrush. The pines were so awesome, so ancient, so desolate. The incredible loneliness of this twilight wilderness assailed Gerry — and strangly soothed the turmoil of his emotions.

The restless wind moved the branches above him in ceaseless song. Sighing, whispering pines. Here was the very sound of loneliness. Again Gerry recalled the old mountain folk tune:

The longest train I ever saw,
Was a hundred coaches long,
And the only girl I ever loved,
Was on that train and gone.
In the pines, in the pines,
Where the sun never shines,
And I shiver when the wind blows cold.

What was happening to him? A year ago he would have laughed at the absurd idea of ghosts or haunted houses. Had he changed so much since then — since the accident?

No, this couldn't actually be happening to him. He must try to examine all the facts with the same clear, down-to-earth attitude he formerly would have taken. He had come here with his nerves in bad shape — on the verge of a breakdown, the doctors had implied. Then he'd found an unusual painting and read through the diary of a deranged artist. Nerves and too much Scotch had got the best of his disordered imagination, and he had assumed the same delusions of poor Pittman. Add to that the stories of the place he had gleaned from the locals, and his newborn romantic streak had run wild — to the point he was sharing Pittman's own mad hallucinations. Similarities were not surprising; the circumstances that induced the delusions were the same, and he had Pittman's notes to direct him.

Besides, if the Reagan place were haunted, why had no one else seen anything out of the ordinary? Pittman in his egotism had claimed his artistic soul made it possible for him to perceive what lesser minds had missed. But Gerry had no artistic pretensions or illusions of paranormal talents.

Pittman had suggested that someone might become susceptible to the spirit world, if he had somehow become alienated from his normal plane of existence. Gerry shrugged mentally. Perhaps

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then he had become receptive to the other world when the protection of his safe middle-class existence had collapsed about him. But now he was accepting the logic of a suicide.

He paused in bewilderment. The pine forest had suddenly assumed a sense of familiarity. Curiously Gerry studied his surroundings — then it occurred to him. Granted the passage of time, this section of the forest resembled the background in the painting of Renee. He had half assumed Pittman had done a stylized portrayal, rather than an actual landscape. How odd to happen upon the same grove of pines and then to recognize it from the painting.

Why had Pittman chosen this particular section of the pines? Probably he had simply wandered to this spot just as Gerry had done. Still, perhaps there was something that made this spot especially attractive to the artist.

Gerry stood in silence. Was it imagination again? Did the sun seem to shine less brightly here? Did the pines seem to loom darker, with a shadow of menace? Was the whisper of the pines louder here, and was there a note of depravity in the loneliness of the sound? Why were there no cries of birds, no sounds of life, other than the incessant murmur of the brooding pines? And why was there a bare circle of earth where not even the pines grew?

Gerry shivered. He hurried from the spot, no longer so certain of his logic.

Janet was sulking when Gerry returned, and they studiously avoided each other for the remainder of the day. Monosyllables were exchanged when conversation was unavoidable, and whatever went through the mind of either was left to fester unexpressed. Mechanically Janet prepared dinner, although neither felt like eating.

"I can't take this!" Janet finally blurted. "I don't know what's happened to us since we got here, but we're tearing ourselves apart. This just hasn't worked for us, Gerry. Tomorrow I want to go home."

Gerry sighed ponderously. "Now look. We came here so you could rest. And now already you want to go back."

"Gerry, I can't stand it here! Every day I've felt you grow farther away from me! I don't know if it's just this place, or if it's us — but I do know we've got to leave!"

"We'll talk about it in the morning," he said wearily and stood up.

Janet's lips were set. "Right! Now go on downstairs and drink

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yourself to sleep! That's the pattern, isn't it? You can't bear to be around me; so you get as far away as you can! And you stumble around all day either drunk or hungover! Always bleary-eyed, paunchy and surly! Gerry, I can't take this any longer!"

He retreated stolidly. "Go to bed, Janet. We'll talk this over in the morning."

"Damn it, Gerry! I've tried to be patient. The doctors warned me you'd made an unhealthy adjustment to the accident — just because you came out no worse than hungover! But if this doesn't stop, I'm going to ask for a separation!"

Gerry halted, angry retorts poised on his tongue. No, let her yell. Ignore her. "Goodnight, Janet," he grated and fled downstairs.

Angrily he gulped down half a glass of straight Scotch. God! This Scotch was the only thing that held their marriage together — made this situation tolerable. And, he noticed, his stock of Scotch was just about gone.

Divorce! Well, why not! Let the leech live off alimony for the rest of her years! It was almost worth paying to be rid of her! Let her divorce him then! She'd made a ruin of everything else in his life — might as well finish the job right!

Once again he thought of Renee. There was a woman to love, to desire — a woman who could stand on her own two feet, who could return his love with full passion of her own! She and Janet shared their sex with no more in common than a leopardess and a cow. No wonder Pittman had fallen in love with his phantasy of Renee!

Damn Janet! Damn the doctors! Bitching him about his emotional stability. So he drank more than he used to! So he maybe threw a scene or two, maybe felt a little differently about things now! Well, it was a different world! A man was entitled to make adjustments. Maybe he needed a little more time...

No! It wasn't *his* fault!

The glass slipped from his shaking first, smashed on the floor. Gerry pawed at it clumsily, cursing the spilled liquor He'd fix another and clean up tomorrow. Dully he noticed another broken glass. When had he...?

It was late when Gerry finally drifted off to sleep, as had become his habit. Smiling, he welcomed Renee when she came to him. How strange to be dreaming, he mused, and yet know that it's a dream.

"Here again, darling?" There was secret humor in her grave smile. "And looking so sad again. What are we to do with you, Gerry? I so hate to see you all alone in a blue funk every night! The wife?"

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"Janet. The bitch!" he mumbled thickly. "She wants me to leave you!"

Renee was dismayed. "Leave? When I'm just getting so fond of you? Hey, lover, that sounds pretty grim!"

Brokenly Gerry blurted out his anger, his pain. Told her of the lies and insinuations. Told her how hard it was to get through each day, how only a stiff drink and the memory of her smile could calm his nerves each night.

Renee listened in silence, only nodding to show she understood, until he finished and sat quivering with anger. "It sounds to me like you've finally realized Janet has only been a nagging obstruction in your life," she observed. "Surely you've never loved her."

Gerry nodded vehemently. "I hate her!"

She smiled lazily and snuggled closer, her lips only inches from his own. "What about me, Gerry? Do you love your Renee?"

His Renee! "With all my soul!" he whispered huskily.

"Mmmmm. That's sweet." Renee held him with her glowing eyes. "So you love Renee more than Janet?"

"Yes! Of course I do!"

"And would you like to be rid of Janet so you could be with me?"

"God, how I wish that!"

Her smile burned more confident. "What if she died? Would you want Janet dead?"

Bitterness poisoned his spirit. "Janet dead? Yes! That would be perfect! I wish she were dead so we could be together!"

"Oh, sweetheart!" Renee squeezed him delightedly. "You really do love me, don't you! Let's kiss on our bargain!"

Somewhere in her kiss the dream dissolved to blackness.

From upstairs a shriek of black terror shattered the stillness of the night.

He started awake sometime later, groggily rubbed his head while trying to collect his thoughts. What had happened? The dream... He remembered. And suddenly he had the feeling that something was wrong, dreadfully *wrong*. Strangely frightened, he staggered up the stairs. "Janet?" he called, his voice unnatural.

Moonlight spilled through the rusty screen and highlighted the crumpled figure who lay in one corner of the room. A small patch of darkness glistened on the wood. Strange how small that pool of blood.

"Janet!" he groaned in disbelieving horror. "Oh, my God!"

Her eyes were wide and staring; her face set in a death grimace of utmost loathing, insane dread. Whatever had killed Janet had first driven her mad with terror.

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It had not been an easy death. Her throat was a jagged gash — too ragged a tear for the knife that lay beside her. A Barlow knife. His.

"Janet!" he sobbed, grief slamming him like a sledge. "Who could have done this thing!"

"Don't you know, lover?"

Gerry whirled, cried out in fear. "Renee. You're alive!"

She laughed at him from the shadow, triumph alight in her eyes. She was just as he had seen her in the painting, in the dreams. Green silk frock, bobbed auburn hair, eyes that held dark secrets. Only now her lips were far more crimson, and scarlet trickled across her chin.

"Yes, Gerry. I'm alive and Janet is dead. Just the way you wished. Or have you forgotten?" Mockery was harsh in her voice.

"Impossible!" he moaned. "You've been dead for years! Ghosts can't exist! Not here! Not today!"

But Renee stepped forward, gripped his hand with fingers like frozen steel. Her nails stabbed his wrist. "You know better."

Gerry stared at her in revulsion. "I don't believe in you! You have no power over me!"

"But you *do* believe in me."

"God, help me! Help me!" he sobbed, mind reeling with nightmare.

Contempt lined her face. "Too late for that."

She pulled his arm, drew him to the door. "Come now, lover! We have a sealed bargain!"

He protested — willed himself not to follow. Struggled to awaken from the nightmare. In vain. Helplessly he followed the creature he himself had given substance.

Out into the pines Renee led him. The pines whose incessant whisper told of black knowledge and secret loneliness. Through the desolate pines they walked into the night. Past endless columns of dark sentinel trunks. Swaying, whispering an ancient rhythm with the night wind.

Until they came to a grove Gerard Randall now found familiar. Where the darkness was deeper. Where the whisper was louder and resonant with doom. Where the pines drew back about a circle of earth in which nothing grew.

Where tonight yawned a pit, and he knew where Renee's unhallowed grave lay hidden.

"Is this madness?" he asked with sudden hope.

"No. This is death."

And the illusion of beauty slipped from Renee, revealed the cavern-eyed lich in rotting silk, who pulled him down into the grave like a bride enticing a bashful groom. And in that final moment Gerard Randall understood the whispered litany of the merciless pines.

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A short and enchanting tale from Phyllis MacLennan, whose last story here, "Thus Love Betrays Us," (September 1972) has ended up in several best of the year anthologies.

The Magic White Horse With His Heart In His Mouth

by PHYLLIS MacLENNAN

A twig-thin little girl, with a narrow frightened face, huge frightened blue eyes, short hair like a cap of amber silk. She stood on the bottom step of the butterfly-painted caravan, mouth square with anguish.

"I don't want to live with Aunt Mary!" she wailed. "Why can't I stay with you?"

"You have to go to school, Carol, honey. You have to settle down somewhere and learn to live like other people. You're growing up, the circus is no place for you now." Getting bald, getting a little paunchy. Shiny eyes, brown as hazelnuts, smiles netted at the corners of them. A gentle, kindly face; a dear face; her father's face.

"But I can go to school on the road, with the other kids, like I have been doing!"

"It was different when your mother was alive. I don't know how to bring up a child."

"But Marcia —" She appealed with her eyes to Marcia: a midget; not a knee-high-to-a-grasshopper midget, but a Little Person; no bigger than an eight-year-old child; no bigger than Carol.

"I only know how to be a little girl," she said, voice clear and sad as teardrops. "I can't teach you to be a woman."

It was settled. It had been settled before they ever told her. They had decided that she should live in a ladylike room with dotted Swiss curtains that stayed all the time in one place, not in a battered old caravan that was home no matter where it went, that had her mother in it still in the things she had touched and lived with.

The people in the town were not circus people; the children in the school were not circus children. They spoke a different language, lived in a dull, cold, unfriendly world, a grey world, without tinsel

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and spangles and laughter, that didn't smell of popcorn and horses and fierce big cats, that had never heard the shriek of The Last Steam Calliope In The World.

The teacher thought it would be interesting for her classmates if Carol told them something about her life with the circus.

She had to stand up in front of them, stand there and tell them—

"My father —" she began. The faces in the classroom blurred. Faces in the stands, like pink balloons piled up row on row, painted each with a round black circle for a mouth, round black circles for eyes; a curtain of color and noise, a backdrop.

"My father is a fairy prince."

Her eyes looked through the magic casement to the enchanted land beyond, her voice was dreamy.

"He turns himself into a fiery milk-white stallion, very beautiful and wild, and he saves fair maidens in distress."

She went back to her place and sat down.

At recess they surrounded her, all the girls; linked arm and arm around her; heathens; savages; hard, sharp laughter like obsidian knives. Into the circle with her stepped Big Bertha, older than the other girls, bigger than the other girls: a greedy, snouted face; little gray eyes like granite pebbles. Even the boys were afraid of her.

She pushed Carol against the wall of girls and they threw her back, and she pushed her against the wall on the other side and they threw her back. They tossed her back and forth, harder and harder, until she was dizzy; and always they threw her back to Bertha, who pulled her by the arms and threw her back again.

"That's for telling lies," Bertha said. "It's for your own good. Somebody has to teach you a lesson." She threw her to the others; they screamed encouragement and threw her back. "You better learn your place, if you know what's good for you, carny. You better shut up. We don't like your kind around here."

She threw her to the others again, and the bell rang, and recess was over, and the thin brown man who had been standing outside the fence, watching, went away.

When she got back to Aunt Mary's house after school, home was there, parked in front of the split-rail fence with the rambler roses on it; and in Aunt Mary's house her father and Marcia were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee; and they looked at her and smiled, from a great distance, from that other world they lived in; and there was no way for her to greet them.

Aunt Mary gave her a glass of milk. Coffee wasn't good for little

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girls; it would stunt their growth, like Marcia.

"They're not paying us, it's for charity," her father said.

"That's a lot for charity," Marcia said. "Is the ceiling high enough?"

"It's the armory. It's high enough. Sixty feet, they said."

"Can Joe get the truck here by Saturday?"

"He'll be here."

On Saturday the whole school was there at the armory in the afternoon, in a special section. Carol was supposed to sit with her class, but she slipped away to find a place down front. It was a dull show: a marching band and baton twirlers and clumsy tumblers from the high school, until the loudspeakers blared:

"And now, la-deez and genna-mun, the world-renowned... death-defying... supersensational... *clowns!* CASPER AND MARCIA!"

And the red fire truck rushes out. Joe and his helper set up the platform; and as they work, the magic white horse comes capering into the middle of the arena, caracoling on his hind legs, in a checked jacket and a derby hat, but a magic milk-white stallion for all that, tossing his head and prancing and kicking, galloping around the arena, until there is the platform, forty feet high, and the hidden fans blowing the red and yellow paper flames that dance and threaten the fairy princess, who clasps her hands in prayer, flings her arms wide in appeal for help, dashes from side to side of the tiny platform mutely screaming save me, save me!

Down on the ground the white horse sees her. He claps his front hoofs to his chest, his jaw drops open, his gleaming, crimson heart leaps into his mouth. He runs frantically to every side of the arena, his heart in his mouth, gesticulating for someone to help; but no one volunteers. He is the only one; he tears off his coat and gallops to stand below the platform, nodding his head, "Jump! Jump!"

And the little princess, high in the air, looking down, draws back and hesitates; the drums roll; she flings the back of her hand to her forehead. Menaced by the leaping flames, yes, she will jump, she nods.

And the drums roll.

And the little-girl princess launches herself into the air, arms widespread. Like a falcon she plummets toward the ground.

The crowd screams.

There she is, arms outstretched, neatly balanced on the magic horse's forelimbs.

The crowd screams and cheers, the band plays, the horse takes off his head and turns into a man

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again, and the princess rewards him with a kiss.

And very late that night, as she lies in bed, half-asleep, Carol dreams of the road whining under the caravan's tires and tells herself a story:

"My father is a fairy prince...."

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Graham Petrie writes: "I am 32 years old, of British nationality, was born in Malaysia and was educated there and in Scotland. I have lived and worked in Canada since 1964 and teach at McMaster University, where my courses are on Film and Science Fiction. I have published film criticism, including a book, *The Cinema of Francois Truffaut,* and fiction in *Playboy, Encounter* and elsewhere."

Herman

by GRAHAM PETRIE

Although Jacobs and I had once been quite close, we had drifted apart in the manner that often occurs when a friend marries someone you dislike or who does not take to you: after several visits in which your attempts to speak to him about old times are accompanied by her frosty disapproval (she sits stiffly on the sofa beside you, clutching a cup of tea in her hand), you catch him alone for a moment and suggest going out for a drink; he looks nervous and says that when they go out now it's always together, they are so close, don't you see? and share so much, but he can open a bottle of beer, he's sure she won't mind. At this you shake your head sadly and take your leave; he calls you a week later perhaps and asks if you would come to dinner, to meet the Larkins, friends of his wife, he's sure you would like them; you make some excuse and that's the last you hear of him, it rankles a little at first and then you forget him. So when the phone rang and a voice said, "This is Jacobs, Brian Jacobs," it was at least a minute before I remembered who he was, it had been nearly five years.

We brought each other up to date while I waited for him to come to the reason for his call; when I asked dutifully how his wife was, he told me, with a touch of relief in his voice, that they no longer lived together — a separation, he said, and then a divorce. I made no comment, wondering if this was his purpose at last, to pick up the threads. Free once more, perhaps he might return to his old self — and then I thought of how much I too had changed in the ten years since we first met: nothing can be

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recaptured and we are never truly free. Thinking this, I had missed what he said next, and he had to repeat it: "Will you look after Herman for me?" he asked. "While I'm away?"

I was startled at this and said that I was no person to leave a child with: was there not a sister or grandmother somewhere who would do instead? "No, no," he told me, "you don't understand. We have no children, the only good thing that resulted. Herman is a pet, I have no one else to leave him with." I thought this was strange, but then perhaps the friends since his marriage had supported his wife; that often happens too, and maybe he was even in the wrong. "Are there no kennels?" I asked.

"You don't understand," he said once more, his voice weary, and suddenly I suspected that he had tried many people and they had all refused him; I was the last on his list, an entry no doubt in an old address book he had forgotten to throw away. I imagined him puzzling over the unfamiliar name, wondering who I was and if it was safe to try me; perhaps he still didn't remember me properly, and this was just a desperate speculation. "You don't keep animals like Herman in kennels."

Is the creature so valuable then? I wondered and, to try him, I asked at random, "Do you ever hear from —?" and mentioned someone we had once known.

"No, of course not," he snapped, his voice sharp and impatient, "I didn't phone to talk about old times. Will you take Herman, or not?" I was going to refuse him; I had lowered the phone in fact halfway towards its cradle without replying to him, when I was shaken by a spasm of guilt: the man must be lonely, embarrassed too at having to ask a favor in this manner. I raised the phone to my ear again: "Yes, I'll take him," I said. "When do you want to bring him round?"

"Tonight," he said, "I have to leave tomorrow." The abruptness of it all startled me, and I was tempted once more to back out. "That early?" I queried. "But what shall I feed him? And where does he sleep? And what is his routine, exercise, I have to go out to work all day, you know?"

"I'll tell you all that when I bring him," he told me. "I'll bring his food with me, he doesn't eat much. I'll be round at ten o'clock." He rang off suddenly, without saying good-by, as if he feared that I might yet withdraw and he had to deny me the opportunity. I thought of calling him back and saying I couldn't do it, the thought of having a dog around frightened me, a huge animal perhaps: messy and affectionate or hostile and with-

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drawn, it was all the same. I looked for his number in the phone book, but it was not to be found.

I decided just to wait till he arrived and turn him away at the door. "I'm sorry," I practiced saying, "there's a rule, the landlord says, no animals. I'd forgotten, but there's nothing I can do about it." Or: "Just after you called, a girlfriend phoned. She wants me to go to her place for the weekend. Sorry, but you know how it is." That would be better, more in tune with the person I once was. I rehearsed it and when the bell rang I stepped firmly to the door. "Sorry," I began, but he pushed his way inside, carrying a large box about three feet long and two feet deep. He dumped the box on the floor and stood for a moment, panting. "My God, it's heavy," he said. "Never thought I'd make it. Mind if I take my coat off?"

He threw his coat on to the sofa and looked round the room admiringly. "Nice place you have here," he said. "Herman'll like it." There was a strained self-confidence in his manner that contrasted oddly with the tentativeness of his earlier behavior on the telephone. I closed the door and approached him, still determined to make him leave, but my curiosity was aroused by the box, and I hesitated just long enough to allow him to maintain the initiative.

"That's where he sleeps," he informed me. "No trouble at all. Clean it out once a week, put in new straw. Fully house-trained. Only exercise he needs is to have the run of the house while you're out. I guarantee he won't damage a thing. Not even books," he added, gazing at the shelves that stretched from floor to ceiling all round the room. "As for food, throw in a loaf of bread soaked in rum every morning. It's all he eats. I brought a couple with me, to start you off."

"Rum?" I repeated, dazed at this barrage of information.

"Yes, rum. Gives him his liquids. He won't touch water, you know. Well, have to go now." He stood up and prepared to take his leave. "Plane at seven thirty tomorrow morning."

I put out my hand to detain him. "When are you going to be back?" I demanded. "You haven't even told me where you're going. How long am I supposed to keep him for?" Jacobs simply smiled at me blandly, without replying, and I grew intensely irritated. I felt I was being taken advantage of, an old friend neglected for years, called in only when those who had replaced me had let him down. "I'm not taking him," I said. "I meant to tell you on the phone, but you rang off. Besides," searching for an excuse, "I'm allergic to dogs."

"Herman's not a dog," Jacobs

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replied, staring at me in amazement. "I thought you'd realized that. He's a lentog."

"A lentog?" I repeated in bewilderment. "What's that?"

"He's a hybrid," Jacobs explained. "Totally unique. I've been working on him for years. This is the first real success I've had. You'll have to take good care of him, he's irreplaceable." As he said this, the facade of self-assurance he had maintained since entering the room suddenly vanished, and he looked at me beseechingly, with tears in his eyes. "Please take good care of him," he pleaded. "No one else would take him once they learned what he was. That's why I had to trick you. Please, you're my only hope."

I vacillated, staring at his crumpled face, on which a tear was actually visible, and then at the still-closed box. My curiosity overcame me, and I knelt down to unfasten the latch that held the lid in place. I raised the top cautiously and peered inside.

The lentog stared calmly back at me: he was hardly bigger than a kitten and seemed lost in the huge interior of the box. The eyes were green and unwinking, and he had pointed ears, like a cat, but there were resemblances to at least half a dozen other animals even in the little I could perceive of his huddled-up body. I gazed at him in fascination: he seemed so small and vulnerable that I was tempted to stretch in my hand and pick him up and stroke him, but there was always the danger that he might be shy or even vicious: he might bite or claw.

I turned to ask Jacobs how safe it was to handle the animal and was shocked to discover that he had disappeared: he must have taken advantage of my preoccupation with Herman to slip quietly out of the door. I hastily closed the lid of the box, to prevent the animal escaping, and rushed out into the corridor and along to the elevator, but by then it was far too late and the man was probably well into the street and away.

I returned to my apartment and went straight to the phone, intending to find out where Jacobs lived and track him down before he could vanish completely: I was certain that I would never see him again otherwise and that he had used me to rid himself of something that had become an embarrassment or even a danger to him. As I picked up the receiver, my eye caught sight of the time on the clock that stood beside it on the table: it was 11:05. Jacobs had arrived, as he had promised, exactly at ten o'clock and he had stayed for not more than ten minutes: it was impossible that a whole hour could have passed

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already. I checked my watch and found that it gave the same time as the clock. I lowered the receiver and pondered on what could have happened: was it possible that in the few moments I had spent gazing into the lentog's eyes, a full hour could in reality have slipped past? I picked up the phone again and asked for Information, but it was hopeless, they could tell me nothing from just the name and I had no address to trace him by.

I tried to remember where Jacobs had worked when I knew him, but all that came back was that he had done research for some large company, and I was unable even to decide which one. I went back to the box and opened the lid: the animal was curled up, asleep, and in the opposite corner were two loaves of bread I had overlooked before, with a note pinned to one of them. "Don't forget the rum," it said. I crumpled it up and tossed it aside: I had no rum in the house; in fact I hate the stuff and had no intention of buying any. The creature could starve for all I cared about it.

I closed the box and prepared for bed, but it was some time before I could settle to sleep. For all my feelings of resentment, I knew that I could not let the animal die on my hands, and yet I had no desire to become responsible for its welfare for the rest of my life — for all I knew it might survive for years to come. The obvious course was to take it to the zoo or to the Animal Protection Society, but the nagging thought had already come to me that Jacobs had perhaps stolen the creature, probably from the research laboratory in which he worked, and there might be unpleasant complications if I took the matter to an official source without checking first.

I slept badly and woke early in the morning. It was light already, and a faint scratching noise came from inside the box. I opened it once more and gazed wearily inside: the lentog was moving restlessly about and it seemed much bigger now than it had the previous night. I could have sworn that it had doubled in size, though, to be sure, I had not seen it at full stretch before. It stared unwinkingly back at me and, with a wrench, I averted my eyes, remembering what might have happened the last time I returned that gaze. It started to scramble up the side of the box, trying to get out, and I slammed the lid down hastily. A moment later, however, I opened it again: Jacobs had said that the beast needed exercise, and no doubt it was hungry too; there was no point in punishing it simply because I felt hostility towards the man who had left it with me.

Cautiously I stretched my hand

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inside and seized the creature round the belly. It offered no resistance, and in fact I could feel it relaxing against my palm in a trusting and almost affectionate manner. Instead of being soft, like a cat's, as I had expected, its underside was hard and wrinkled: for some reason I thought of the armor plating of a rhinoceros. I placed it carefully on the floor and stood back to watch it: it stretched itself once more and looked with curiosity at its new surroundings; then it leapt lightly onto the sofa and from there began to prowl about the room, jumping from sofa to chair to table, and even onto empty spaces on the bookshelves.

Although from its eyes and ears and the gracefulness of its movement I had come almost automatically to think of it as some kind of cat, the creature was in fact a combination of several totally incompatible species. I found it difficult to identify them all, and the attributes often seemed weirdly to shift and change, so that at one moment its head might have the flat sleekness of a leopard and the next it was more like a lynx or cougar; but there was something in it of the dog, the cat, the leopard, the squirrel, and the fox, not to mention the rhinoceros and possibly even the snake.

I went into the kitchen carrying the loaves of bread that Jacobs had left, intending to soak them in water; then I remember his saying that water would not do. I glanced at my watch and realized that I could not buy any rum for at least another three hours, and I felt suddenly uneasy lest hunger should turn the creature unexpectedly vicious. I decided to borrow some rum and went along to a neighboring apartment, taking care to secure my door behind me. The owner, whom I knew slightly from traveling to work on the same bus each day, gazed at me with the utmost suspicion, but, as I chose not to give any explanation, he handed me over a half-full bottle with a shrug that indicated it was none of his business if I chose to drink myself to death before breakfast.

I soaked one of the loaves in a bowl of the liquid for several minutes and then offered it to the lentog. He sniffed at it tentatively, then set briskly to work, tearing at the bread and swallowing it avidly. When he had finished, he glanced at me inquiringly, as though expecting more. I prepared the second loaf, and he ate that too. He offered no resistance to being put back in his box after that, though his appetite set me to wondering about Jacob's assertion that one loaf a day would be sufficient.

There was no question, of course, of my going to work that

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day, and I was determined to decide a strategy for dealing with the situation. As soon as it was feasible, I phoned the zoo and asked to speak to someone about a rare animal I had read about. The woman listened patiently while I described Herman and explained that I had read about him in a magazine; then she laughed tolerantly and said that it must have been a science-fiction one, for no such animal could possibly exist. "Are you sure?" I inquired anxiously, and, "Certainly," she assured me, a sniff that implied I had challenged her professional competence. "The creature is a figment of the imagination. It is a physical impossibility."

Somewhat comforted by this, I opened the box again and settled myself in a position on the sofa from which I could see the lentog clearly. He was curled up in a corner once more, as he had been the night before, and there was no doubt about it this time: he was at least twice the size he had been then and indeed seemed even to have grown since breakfast. He raised his head and stared at me solemnly, and I began to wonder what would happen if he continued to develop at this rate and when, if ever, he would stop. Then it occurred to me that Jacobs must have known what he was doing when he made the box the size it was: presumably the creature would grow until it could live inside it comfortably, and that would be all. But he might at least have mentioned that to me, for the problem of feeding was certainly not going to be as simple as he had indicated.

Without making any conscious decision, I realized I was going to keep the animal after all — for a few days more at least. The zoo might well be interested in it, as a freak of nature, but there would still be awkward questions to answer and explanations to give. Besides I had come already to feel a certain affection for it: there was a look of trust in its eyes that drew me to it, and, for all its apparent ability to take care of itself, it was still vulnerable and — the word seemed almost to be spoken within the room so that I looked round with a start to see who had spoken it — lonely.

The movement broke the reverie into which I had drifted, and when I consulted my watch, I was astonished to see that it was past twelve o'clock already. I leapt to my feet and stooped anxiously over the box: "How do you feel, Herman?" I asked him. "Are you hungry again?" The creature seemed almost to understand me for he lowered his head in what I interpreted as a nod. "You wait

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there," I told him. "I'll be right back."

I went out and bought half a dozen loaves and four bottles of run — enough, I hoped, to do for another day at least. Once again he ate two of the loaves but hinted that I had not put enough rum in with them; I decided finally on a proportion of half a bottle of rum to each loaf, and this appeared to satisfy him. He made no objection to being returned to his box afterwards, and on the occasions later in the day when I released him once more, he gave no indication whatever of destructive tendencies. I spent the rest of the time becoming better acquainted with him, studying him with fascination and vainly attempting to distinguish the point at which the clearly marked characteristics of one animal merged and blended with those of another.

For the next few days, everything went well. I discovered that it was safe for me to return to work, leaving Herman to roam around the apartment, knowing that nothing would be damaged when I returned. He continued to grow steadily for about four days, until, as I had hoped, he reached a size that allowed him to use his box simply as a sleeping place and nothing more. His appetite settled down at a diet of twelve loaves a day, and my only real problem became the cost of his supply of rum. I attempted to substitute a bottle of cheap wine one day, but the look of hurt disdain with which he greeted this pathetic deception made me ashamed to experiment further in this direction. I spent most of the evenings at home, reading or listening to records, or chatting idly to Herman, who would lie at my feet, gazing at me with his intelligent eyes, usually agreeing with what I said, though occasionally he expressed dissent.

On the seventh evening I received an unexpected phone call. "This is Helen Jacobs," a voice said. "Brian Jacobs' wife. I believe you have something that belongs to me."

I was flustered and hardly knew what to say. "Something of yours?" I repeated.

"Yes," she said. "You know what I mean. That animal. And I want it back."

I gazed at Herman, who had risen to his feet and was staring at me in dismay. Then, as though becoming aware of the tenor of the conversation or even the identity of the caller, he drew his lips back in a snarl, and a faint hissing sound came from between them.

I asked her if she could establish ownership of Herman and pointed out that her husband had explicitly left him in my care.

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"My husband has deserted me," she said flatly. "He has abandoned his responsibilities. The divorce papers are drawn up, but he refuses to sign them and we are unable to contact him. My lawyer is attempting to track down as many of his assets as possible and hold them until my husband reappears. He tried to be cunning, he hid things with friends. He hid that animal with you. I have a legal right to it, and it will be simpler for us all if you don't challenge me. Now, will you let me have it back?"

I was about to resist further and ask her to describe in detail the animal she claimed to own, but Herman prevented me, nuzzling my leg affectionately with his head: "Let her come."

"All right," I told her. "If you say he belongs to you and you can prove it, that's fine. You seem to have found out where I live. Come round and get him."

I put the phone down and turned to look at Herman. "We'll show her," I assured him. I settled back in my chair and Herman rested at my feet, his head on his outstretched paws, his eyes fixed on mine. "We'll handle her," I repeated thoughtfully. "You and I both."

A buzzing sound on the intercom startled me, and I leapt to my feet. "That's quick," I thought. "Unless they phoned from just round the corner." I pressed the communication switch. "Who is it?" I asked..

"Helen Jacobs.". The voice floated hollowly from several floors below and swirled round the room. Herman had risen to his feet and was standing with legs braced apart; the hissing noise came from him once more. I opened the outside door to her and turned to warn Herman: "No nonsense," I reminded him, "or you go back in your box. Leave it all to me."

There was a knock on the door; I opened it and let her in. She was alone; I had expected to find her lawyer with her and was forced to begin a rapid reassessment of my strategy. She took off her coat and held it out to me, then settled herself on the sofa, ignoring Herman, who had retreated to a far corner of the room and squatted there, staring at her balefully.

"I'll take a drink," she told me. "I expect you've got plenty of rum. That'll do."

As though in a daze, I obeyed her. I brought her some rum and a bottle of Coca Cola and set them on the table beside her. I sat down in the armchair and surveyed her as she mixed herself a drink that made use of a good deal of the rum. She had changed of course in five years, but she was still recognizably Helen: somewhat plumper, wrinkles appearing round her eyes, her

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cheeks more heavily powdered than before.

She took a long drink and settled back against the cushion, crossing her legs as she did so. I glanced at them; they too had filled out, but the curious thing was that the extra weight and flesh gave her a solidity, a humanity, that made her for a moment almost attractive. "That's better," she said. She gazed at me appraisingly and there was a hardness about her eyes that I recognized. I glanced away and beckoned to Herman to come to my side. He padded quietly across the floor and settled beside me; I rested my hand on his flank and could feel his body pulsing with that almost unaudible hissing.

"Look," she said, "it's late. I got delayed on the way, so let's get down to business. You've got no use for that thing, but it means a lot to me. I don't suppose you'll object to handing it over — for a small acknowledgment, of course, of the inconveniences of having it around. Shall we say one hundred dollars?"

I tightened my grip on Herman, whose body had tensed as though for a leap. "I don't want money," I said. "Anyway I have no authority to hand him over to you. Suppose Brian came back tomorrow?"

"You won't see him again," she said scornfully. "None of us will. And no tears either, as long as he does what's right by me. If you don't want money, just give me the creature and I'll go. Otherwise I'll come back tomorrow, with the police."

"All right," I said, stroking Herman reassuringly, so that he would not misunderstand. "Before I let you have him, tell me something about him. I'm curious, that's all."

"It's just one of Brian's experiments," she replied impatiently. "This time it worked. I'm told a zoo or a research laboratory will pay a lot to examine it."

"Dead or alive?" I muttered.

She shrugged and took another drink.

"Are you in a taxi?" I asked. "Or did you drive yourself?"

"I have my own car," she said, apparently surprised I had capitulated so soon. "It's a long drive, thirty miles; the sooner I go the better." She got to her feet and I rose too.

"Your coat's in the closet," I said. "I'll get Herman ready." Holding him firmly by the scruff of the neck, I led him to his box. "I'll leave the top unfastened," I whispered, "you can get out easily enough. After that it's up to you. I'll be waiting for you." He gave me a quick glance of understanding as he settled himself inside. I lowered the lid and fumbled with the lock, pretending to secure it.

Mrs. Jacobs had her coat on by

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now, and she came towards me, her hand outstretched and with an air of relieved affability. "Thank you so much for seeing it my way," she smiled. "It makes things so much easier. After all, it's only an animal, and Brian left me with so little. It's impossible to make ends meet."

"I'll carry it down for you," I offered. "It's very heavy." I staggered along to the elevator with the box, and as we waited there, she brought her head close to mine and whispered, "If you want to change your mind about the hundred dollars..." I smiled at her and shook my head. We took the elevator to the ground floor, and I carried the box out to her car. She started to open the trunk, but I said that Herman might suffocate in there; it would be better to put him on the back seat. I settled the box in place and checked that the lid was still loose. "Bye, Herman," I whispered. "See you soon."

Mrs. Jacobs took my hand once more. "Thank you so much," she said. "I must have misjudged you in the past. It was just that Brian had so many awful friends." I smiled and waved my hand deprecatingly. She got in behind the wheel and drove off.

I walked slowly inside and took the elevator up to my floor. Back in my apartment I began to tidy up. The space where Herman's box had stood looked bare and desolate, but I decided to leave it as it was for the moment. I sat down on the sofa and then, remembering that Helen had sat there, I moved over to my usual chair. I had no desire to read; I sat with my hands folded under my chin and thought again of Herman and his unwinking, green, intelligent eyes. I imagined the car speeding along the highway and Herman cautiously raising the lid of the box as Mrs. Jacobs sat confidently before him, her attention fixed on the road. "He'll know how to handle her," I thought, and I knew then why Brian had left him with me.

COMING NEXT MONTH

Our September issue will be a special Frederik Pohl issue, featuring a novella by Fred Pohl, a profile by Lester del Rey and a bibliography. On sale August 2.

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CONSTANT AS THE NORTHERN STAR

One trouble with making a profession of thinking of things is that occasionally you think of something that makes you recognize your own stupidity. This is particularly embarrassing when you spend half your time smiling modestly while other people tell you how smart you are.

Here is what I said in a book of mine called *The Land of Canaan* (Houghton Mifflin, 1971) concerning the early voyages of the Phoenicians, the most remarkable mariners of ancient times:

"It is possible that the Phoenicians were helped in their explorations by a notable advance in technology. The open sea lacks landmarks to guide the traveler for, as the word itself indicates, these are restricted to land. The stars in the sky might be landmarks if they did not steadily turn. They turn about a hub in the sky, however, and near that hub is the bright star Polaris, the one star that scarcely changes position at any time. It is possible that the Phoenicians were the first to learn to use Polaris as a 'landmark' at sea and that it was this that opened the western Mediterranean to them."

I should have known better, and it is small comfort to me that William Shakespeare made a

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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similar mistake. In *Julius Caesar,* he has Caesar make the following grandiloquent statement shortly before he is stabbed:

> "But I am constant as the Northern Star,
> Of whose true-fixed and resting quality
> There is no fellow in the firmament.
> The skies are painted with unnumb'red sparks,
> They are all fire, and every one doth shine;
> But there's but one in all doth hold his place."

I think it is possible that Francis Bacon might not have made this particular mistake — another piece of evidence that Bacon didn't write Shakespeare's plays (see "Bill and I," July, 1971).*

Well, let's see what the mistake is, and why.

The Earth rotates about an axis, which can be pictured as a line passing through the center of the planet and emerging at opposite points on the surface, at the North Pole and the South Pole. The west-to-east rotation of the Earth about this axis is unnoticeable to us. It seems to us that the Earth stands still and the sky rotates east-to-west.

The illusory rotation of the skies takes place around the same axis as does the real rotation of the Earth. If the axis of the Earth is extended in imagination it will intersect the sky, or the "Celestial Sphere" at two opposite points, the "North Celestial Pole" and the "South Celestial Pole." A line whose points are each and all half way between the two Celestial Poles is the "Celestial Equator" and, indeed, the Celestial Sphere is marked off with a cross-hatching of latitude and longitude just as the surface of the Earth is (an imagination only, of course).

Wherever we stand on Earth, the point in the sky directly overhead (at "zenith") is at the same "Celestial Latitude" as the Earthly latitude on which we stand.

If we were standing on the Earth's North Pole, for instance, we would see the North Celestial Pole at zenith and all the stars turning in a grand twenty-four-hour sweep about it in a counter-clockwise direction. If we were standing on the Earth's South Pole, we would see the South Celestial Pole at zenith and all the stars turning a grand twenty-four-hour sweep about it in a clockwise direction.

**On the other hand, people might judge from the mistake about Polaris that Isaac Asimov, well-known to be knowledgeable about astronomy, didn't write* The Land of Canaan. *Deductions of this sort can be shaky.*

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From anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere, the North Celestial Pole is somewhere above the northern horizon. Where it is, it remains, and the stars circle it. The South Celestial Pole is somewhere below the southern horizon and remains there. From anywhere in the Southern Hemisphere, it is the South Celestial Pole that is fixed in some point above the southern horizon, while the North Celestial Pole is hidden somewhere below the northern horizon.

The nearer we are to either of Earth's Poles, the higher the corresponding Pole is in the sky. The height of the Celestial Pole above the horizon is, in point of fact, equal to the observer's latitude on the Earth's surface.

At the moment, for instance, I am sitting at a point that is at roughly 40.8 degrees North Latitude. This means that, for me, the North Celestial Pole is 40.8 degrees above the northern horizon calculated for sea-level.

All the stars circle the North Celestial Pole, and those that are less than 40.8 degrees from it make circles that at no point reach the northern horizon. All those stars, as viewed from where I sit, remain always above the horizon, day and night.*

Stars that are more than 40.8 degrees from the North Celestial Pole make circles so large that (as viewed by myself) they cut below the horizon. Such stars rise and set.

The South Celestial Pole, from where I sit, is always 40.8 degrees below the southern horizon, and any star within 40.8 degrees of it makes a circle that remains below the horizon at all points. I never see any of them.

If I were to leave home and travel farther north, the North Celestial Pole would rise higher in the sky and the circular patch of stars that remained always above the horizon (and the similar patch of stars in the neighborhood of the South Celestial Pole that remain always below the horizon) would increase in area. At the North Pole, all the stars in the Northern Celestial Hemisphere would remain always above the horizon and all the stars in the Southern Celestial Hemisphere would remain always below the horizon. (The situation would be reversed at the South Pole, of course.)

If I were to leave home and travel farther south, on the other hand, the North Celestial Pole would sink lower in the sky and the patch of stars always above the horizon at one end and below the horizon at the other,

The presence of the Sun is a complication, since when it is in the sky, we can't see the stars. However, the ancients learned to calculate the positions of the stars even when they could not be seen.

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would decrease in area. At the Equator, those patches would shrink to zero. The North Celestial Pole would be at the northern horizon, the South Celestial Pole at the southern, and all the stars without exception would rise and set. It was this changing behavior of the stars with changing latitude that helped give the ancient Greeks the notion that the Earth must be a sphere.

Naturally, anyone watching the skies attentively night after night, from a reasonably high latitude* would see the stars make a circle about some point in the northern sky. That point, the center about which the stars turn, would itself be motionless, of course.

Unfortunately, there is no way in which a particular point on the featureless Celestial Sphere can be marked out easily, *unless* there should happen, by the sheerest of coincidences, to be a bright star at or near the point.

As it happens, there is; a star with a magnitude of 2.1, which makes it one of the two dozen or so brightest stars in the sky. Because this star is so near the North Celestial Pole, it is called "Polaris" or, less formally, "the Pole Star." Because the star remains always in the near neighborhood of the North Celestial Pole which is itself fixed in the northern part of the sky, the star is called, even more informally, "the North Star."

Polaris is not exactly *at* the North Celestial Pole, however. It is about 1.0 degree away. This means it makes a small circle about the North Celestial Pole that is 2.0 degrees in diameter. Such a circle is four times as wide as the Full Moon, so it is by no means an insignificant motion.

However, a change in position becomes noticeable only when it can be compared to something that doesn't change. Since all the stars turn with the sky in one piece, Polaris remains in fixed relationship to the other stars and they won't serve as comparison. The one convenient reference point unaffected by the motions in the sky is the horizon. The height of Polaris above the northern horizon varies in the course of a 24-hour period (from where I sit) from 41.8 degrees to 39.8 degrees.

This difference is not large enough to impress the casual observer. Nor does the fact that Polaris, during this same period, varies from 1.0 degree east of the true north, to 1.0 degree west prove impressive. To the casual

**The first careful star-observers were probably the Sumerians, who lived at about 32 degrees N., far enough northward to make the North Celestial Pole a dominant factor in the night sky.*

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observer, the swing goes unnoticed and it appears that Polaris remains fixed in position, marking out always the exact north.

That is why you can speak of something being as "constant as the Northern Star" and can say that of all the stars "but one in all doth hold this place." And that is why you can always tell which direction is north (provided the night is clear) and can steer a ship surely out of sight of land — as I said the Phoenicians could.

So where's the mistake? Well, let's go on —

In addition to rotating on its axis, the Earth revolves about the Sun. To us on Earth, it seems that the planet remains motionless and that the Sun slowly changes its position among the stars. Careful observers, calculating the position of the stars (invisible in the neighborhood of the Sun, of course) will note that the Sun follows a huge circle all around the Celestial Sphere, taking 365¼ days to complete a single turn. The path it follows is called the "Ecliptic."

As it happens, the Ecliptic does not follow the Celestial Equator as one might assume. Instead it cuts across the Celestial Equator at two points on the opposite sides of the Celestial Sphere. The Ecliptic cuts across the Celestial Equator at an angle of 23.5 degrees.

For half the year the Sun follows the line of the Ecliptic in a loop north of the Celestial Equator. It is then spring and summer in the Northern Hemisphere and the days are longer than the nights. The other half the year, the Sun follows the Ecliptic in a loop south of the Celestial Equator, and it is then fall and winter in the Northern Hemisphere with the nights longer than the day. (The situation is reversed in the Southern Hemisphere.)

The two points where the Ecliptic crosses the Celestial Equator are the "equinoxes" ("equal nights" because when the Sun is at those points, day and night are equal in length the world over). The particular crossing-point at which the Sun is moving from south of the Celestial Equator to north of it, is the "vernal Equinox" because that marks the beginning of spring in the northern hemisphere — where the ancient astronomers lived. The other, in which the Sun is moving from north to south, is the "autumnal equinox" since this marks the beginning of fall.

In passing from vernal equinox to autumnal equinox, the Sun follows the line of the Ecliptic in its northern loop, and half way between the equinoxes it reaches its most northern point, the "summer solstice" ("Sun-Stationary" because at that point the Sun is momentarily stationary

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in its northward drift, before reversing to a southward drift). Between the autumnal equinox and vernal equinox, the Sun follows the southward loop of the Ecliptic, reaching the southernmost point, the "winter solstice" half-way between the equinoxes.

In terms of man-made dates, we have the vernal equinox on March 20; the summer solstice on June 21; the autumnal equinox on September 23; and the winter solstice on December 21.

All this is explained by the fact that the Earth's axis of rotation is not exactly perpendicular to the direction of the Sun, but is tipped 23.5 degrees to that perpendicular. The direction of the axis remains constant relative to the stars as the Earth revolves about the Sun, the North and South Pole pointing to the same spots in the Celestial Sphere throughout the entire revolution.

On June 21, at the summer solstice, the direction of the axis is such that the North Pole is tipped 23.5 degrees in the direction of the Sun (and the South Pole therefore 23.5 degrees in the direction away from the Sun). On December 21, when the Earth is at the opposite end of its orbit about the Sun, The North Pole, tipped in the same direction relative to the stars, is now tipped away from the Sun, while the South Pole is tipped toward it.

The fact that the Earth's axis steadily changes its direction relative to the Sun, would make no difference to the manner in which the Sun attracts the Earth, if the Earth were a perfect sphere.

But the Earth *isn't* a perfect sphere. Because the Earth rotates, there is a centrifugal effect that tends to counter gravity and lift the surface. The effect is more pronounced the faster the Earth turns. The parts of the Earth farther from the axis turn faster, and there is more and more of Earth farther and farther from the axis as one goes from the Poles to the Equator.

The centrifugal effect is therefore stronger and stronger as one goes toward the Equator, and the substance of the Earth lifts up against gravity more and more. The surface of the Earth is farther from the center the closer one gets to the Equator, and at the Equator the surface is 13 miles farther from the center of the Earth than is true of the surface at the Poles. Since the bulge is most extreme at the Equator, it is usually called an "Equatorial bulge."

This means that the Earth, as seen from the Sun, is *not* symmetrical. At the summer solstice, the North Pole is tipped toward the Sun, and the equatorial bulge does not lie across the center of the cross-sectional circle

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of Earth as seen from the Sun. It curves south of the center and the Sun's gravitational pull tends to lift it northward. Of course, there is the equatorial bulge on the other side of the Earth which curves north of the Equator so that the Sun's gravity tends to pull it southward. That, however, does not restore the symmetry, for the other side of the Earth is 8,000 miles farther from the Sun and the Sun's gravitational pull is a trifle weaker there because of the extra distance. As a result, the Sun pulls the near side northward a little harder than it pulls the far side southward, and there is thus a net force northward.

When the Earth is on the other side of the Sun, the net force is southward. During half the year, then, the net force on the equatorial bulge is northward, increasing from zero at the vernal equinox to a maximum at the summer solstice and back to zero at the autumnal equinox. During the other half of the year, the net force is southward, increasing from zero to a maximum at the winter solstice and decreasing to zero again.

The Sun is not the only body in the Solar system that exerts such an unbalanced pull on the Earth. The Moons does it, too. The path of the Moon among the stars, as seen from Earth, is closer to the Ecliptic than it is to the Celestial Equator. (It is tipped to the Ecliptic by five degrees. When the Moon and Sun are both near one of the two crossing points, the Moon crosses in front of the Sun and there is an eclipse. It is because the Moon's approach to the Ecliptic is required for an eclipse that the Ecliptic is so-called.)

The Moon also yanks at the equatorial bulge. To be sure the Moon's mass is only 1/27,000,000 that of the Sun, and even allowing for the Moon's much smaller distance from Earth, its gravitational pull on Earth is only a little over 1/200 that of the distant Sun.

However, the unbalanced pull on the equatorial bulge is related to the *difference* in gravitational pull on the two sides of the Earth, and that varies more strongly with distance than the overall pull itself does (see "Time and Tide," May, 1966). As a result, the Moon's contribution to the asymmetric yank at the equatorial bulge is 2.2 times that of the Sun.

This Lunar-Solar yank at the equatorial bulge causes the Earth's axis to wobble in just the way a gyroscope would under similar circumstances. (Indeed, the Earth, like any massive, rapidly-rotating object, *is* a gyroscope.) Without trying to explain why, here's what happens —

The axis of rotation remains tipped 23.5 degrees to the perpendicular,

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but moves in such a way that the North Pole moves in a circle around the perpendicular. (So does the South Pole, of course.)

Another way of describing it is that the point of the axis at the center of the Earth remains motionless, but north and south it marks out a cone.

Let's look at the sky and see what this means. If the Earth's axis were directly perpendicular to the direction of the Sun, it would point at a spot on the Celestial Sphere which would be equidistant from every point on the Ecliptic. That spot would be to the Ecliptic as Earth's North Pole is to its Equator. Hence the spot in the sky to which the axis would be pointing if it were perpendicular to the direction of the Sun, is called "the North Pole of the Ecliptic." (On the opposite side of the Celestial Sphere is "the South Pole of the Ecliptic.")

The North Celestial Pole is 23.5 degrees from the North Pole of the Ecliptic, but because of the unbalanced pull of the Sun and the Moon on the equatorial bulge, it describes a circle about the North Pole of the Ecliptic, remaining always 23.5 degrees away as it does so.

As the North Celestial Pole makes this circle, and as the South Celestial Pole makes a similar circle at the other end of the sky, the Celestial Equator shifts position, too. It does so in such a way that as the Celestial Poles make one complete circle, each crossing-point of the Celestial Equator and Ecliptic (each equinox, in other words) makes a complete circle about the sky, too.

Each crossing-point moves slowly from east to west as the axis makes its wobble. Meanwhile the Sun is moving from west to east, toward the equinox. Since the crossing-point is coming to meet it, the Sun reaches the equinox earlier than it would if the crossing-point weren't moving. The actual equinox precedes (very slightly) the ideal one.

This was first discovered by the Greek astronomer, Hipparchus, about 130 B.C., and he called it "the precession of the equinoxes." The cause of this precession wasn't explained till Isaac Newton did the job eighteen centuries later.

The precession of the equinoxes is very slow, and it takes the position of each crossing-point 25,780 years to run a complete circle about the Ecliptic. This is the same as saying that the North Celestial Pole takes 25,780 years to complete its circle about the North Pole of the Ecliptic (and the South Celestial Pole about the South Pole of the Ecliptic).

There are 360 degrees in a circle so the North Celestial Pole moves about 0.014 degrees per year. That isn't much. It would take the North Celestial Pole 37 years to move the width of the full Moon, and this motion

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would certainly not be noticed under merely casual observation. It also means that the vernal equinox comes each year 20 minutes earlier than it would have done had there been no precession.

Since the North Celestial Pole *does* move, however, it affects the position of Polaris (which also moves relative to the other stars against the sky, but far more slowly even than precession). At the present moment, the North Celestial Pole is moving in the direction of Polaris, so that Polaris is making smaller and smaller circles about the North Celestial Pole and is becoming more and more nearly a true North Star.

At just about 2100 A.D., the North Celestial Pole will skim past Polaris and at that point Polaris will be only 0.47 degrees away and will make a circle slightly smaller than that of the full Moon. After that, though, the North Celestial Pole will be moving away from Polaris and the circles it makes will increase in diameter again.

Since the North Celestial Pole has been steadily approaching Polaris for centuries, it must have been further away in the past. In 1900, Polaris was 1.2 degrees from the North Celestial Pole, instead of the 1.0 degree distance it is today.

Suppose we go further back, to 1599, when Shakespeare was writing *Julius Caesar*. At that time, Polaris was 2.9 degrees from the North Celestial Pole. The circle it made every twenty-four hours was 5.8 degrees wide, about nine times the width of the full Moon. From the latitude of London (51.5 degrees), Polaris's position would vary from a height of 54.4 degrees above the northern horizon to 48.6 degrees above.

A casual observer might still not notice this. Nor might he notice that in the course of a day, Polaris wobbled east and west to extremes of 2.9 degrees east and west of the true north. Shakespeare could still speak of something being as "constant as the Northern Star" and get away with it.

But hold on. Shakespeare was having Julius Caesar say it just before his assassination of March 15, 44 B.C., and where was Polaris then?

I'll tell you where it was. It was 12.2 degrees from the North Celestial Pole. *Twelve point two degrees!*

From the latitude of Rome (42.0 degrees) Polarish would, in 44 B.C., have been seen to make a huge circle 24.4 degrees in diameter. In the space of twelve hours it would have dropped from a height of 54.2 degrees above the northern horizon to a height of only 29.8 degrees above it. With its height above the horizon cut in half no one could possibly consider it as "constant."

But wait, just because Polaris wasn't near the North Celestial Pole,

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doesn't mean some other star might not be and that this other star might not have been the one referred to by Julius Caesar. Well, there wasn't. No star bright enough to be more than just barely seen was nearer to the North Celestial Pole than Polaris was in 44 B.C.

What it amounts to then was that in Julius Caesar's time, *there wasn't any North Star!* And even if the real Caesar spoke as grandiloquently as the stage Caesars did in Shakespeare's time (which he most certainly didn't), he wouldn't have compared his constancy to something that didn't exist.

And since the *fact* of the precession of the equinoxes had been known for over seventeen centuries, even if the explanation was still eighty years off, Francis Bacon, a very learned man, might have avoided the mistake.

And for myself? what about the Phoenicians?

The great age of their navigation began about 1000 B.C. and at that time, Polaris was 16.8 degrees from the Pole. Of those stars which, in 1000 B.C., were closer to the North Celestial Pole than Polaris was, Thuban is the brightest. Thuban is the brightest star of the constellation of Draco (the Dragon) which occupies the region of the North Pole of the Ecliptic. But Thuban has a magnitude of 3.6 so that it is only one-fourth as bright as Polaris. What's more, it was still fully 9 degrees from the North Celestial Pole, so that it wasn't much of a North Star either.

The Phoenicians could not, therefore, have guided their navigation by discovering the stationariness of Polaris, or of any star, and my careless statement in *The Land of Canaan* is wrong.

But then, what was it the Phoenicians *did* discover? Anything at all?

Yes, they probably made an important discovery. In the northern sky, there are seven second-magnitude stars that form a distinct and familiar shape we call the Big Dipper. All of it lies between 20 degrees and 40 degrees of the North Celestial Pole so that all of its remains in the northern sky constantly, never setting, as seen from Europe or from the northern United States.

It is far easier to see and locate a collection of seven stars in a distinctive shape that it would be to see and locate any single star. Any person, if he can see the stars at all, can locate the Big Dipper at once and without trouble, though he might not be able to locate Polaris (except by using the Big Dipper as a reference).

Furthermore, because of the distinctive shape of the Big Dipper, it is easy to see that it is turning about a center and use that center as a rough north-point.

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What's more the North Celestial Pole, as it has been moving along in the course of the Precession of the equinoxes, has been skimming along the edge of the Big Dipper, at a practically constant distance for something like six thousand years. It is only in the last thousand years, in fact, that the North Celestial Pole is beginning to pull away from the Big Dipper.

It follows, then, that over all of the civilized history, no matter whether there was a North Star or not, the Big Dipper has been spectacularly circling the sky and marking out the central north.

The Greeks saw the Big Dipper as a wagon or "wain," and also saw it as part of a bigger stellar configuration they imagined to be in the shape of a bear. In the time of the Homeric poems, for instance, there was no mention of the North Star, for there wasn't one, but there was mention of the Bear. Thus, in the fifth book of the *Odyssey* when Odysseus is leaving the island of Calypso to return home, Homer says:

"He never closed his eyes, but kept them fixed on the Pleiads, on late-setting Bottes, and on the Bear — which men also call the wain, and which turns round and round where it is, facing Orion, and alone never dipping into the stream of Oceanus, for Calypso had told him to keep this to his left."

If Odysseus kept the Big Dipper to his left, he would be heading toward the east, which was where he wanted to go. If he kept it to his right he would go west. If he headed toward it, he would go north, and away from it, south. But the *Odyssey* was written about 800 B.C. at the very earliest, and this use of the Big Dipper was probably what the Phoenicians discovered about 1000 B.C.

— So why didn't I take a few moments to think this through when I wrote that passage in *The Land of Canaan?*

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Sonya Dorman's stories about Roxy Rimidon of the Planet Patrol include "Bye, Bye, Banana Bird," (December 1969) and "Alpha Bets," (November 1970). In this new story, Roxy, now a sergeant, gets her first off-Earth assignment.

The Bear Went Over The Mountain

by SONYA DORMAN

If you asked ten people to plan their ideal city and combined the ten results into one, you'd have a city much like Grandview. The only thing the ten people seemed to have agreed on was a need for open spaces and parks; Grandview had many of these, with lovely rich turf growing from the red clay soil. Some of the parks were domed, all-weather play places. The largest, known locally as Centerpiece, had a monorail station at its hub. To the east, where clean blocks of three-story buildings spread out, you might suspect the sea only on hazy mornings, although Grandview was just a few miles inland from the Atlantic coast.

I took the monorail toward the medical complex at the north side of town. There were not many passengers, and my view of the clean new city was unobstructed.

A directory was posted in front of the central building of the complex, and so it didn't take me long to locate my mother's new office in the bone bank. I took the walkway over to her building and went up to the top floor. She was lucky to be on that floor, for she would have a view of the whole area from her windows. She always liked to look away at distances, perhaps because she'd lived so long on the coast and looked out to sea where down on the shelf my father was farming until the day he died.

She was bending over a holographic projection of a spinal fusion, clucking her tongue; I could swear she hadn't moved since I'd seen her in Savannah last year, but of course she'd been busy as always.

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She hadn't heard me open the door, and so I paused to look at her: a woman as tall as myself, light-brown hair streaked with pure silver on both sides, the snub, sensuous face of a big cat. I just stood for a moment, admiring her.

"Mm?" she twisted around to look at me. "Roxy! My God, Roxy!" We ran to each other. I bumped her nose with my forehead, we swung each other around. "Oh, look at you," she said, touching the insignia patch. "You're a sergeant. How long can you stay?"

"Only a few days. I don't have an assignment; I have something to do on my own. I want to talk to you about it, but, first, I want to take you to dinner, and we'll have a bottle of wine and halibut steak."

"Halibut steak has gotten very expensive," my mother said, putting the holograph away. "You let me buy the dinner, and you can take care of the wine."

We stood there foolishly, smiling, admiring each other. "You look wonderful," she said to me.

"So do you. Are you courting?"

"I'm too busy here at the bone bank."

"Oh, you're still using old bones."

She laughed and got her coat from the rack in the corner. "We still do, sometimes, for certain jobs, especially the temporary ones. Would you like to see the lab?"

"No," I said. "I'm not interested in the lab just now. I've only got a couple of days, and I want to talk with you before I go to the meeting at Inter-Dominion North."

"Oh?" she looked curiously at me, and for the first time I got that cold gimlet look which she usually reserved for a bit of bone or chunk of porous synthetic. "Will you be stopping off to see Wrexel?"

"Part of the problem is I don't want to embarrass the family."

"Oh, you're not in trouble," she said in a voice of exasperation. "Really, Roxy, you didn't come here expecting me to bail you out of some jam?"

"No, I didn't. I came because I need to talk with someone sensible, but I can shut up or go elsewhere."

"I'm the most sensible person you know," she said. "I'm sorry if I was short with you, but I've been desperately busy."

She was walking toward the door, buttoning her coat, when the door opened and a big man with white hair came in. He said her name, "Mahiri!" and kissed her on the cheek.

She said, "Take it easy, Jack."

Then he saw me, in my Planet Patrol uniform, and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," mom said. "I'd like to present my daughter, Sergeant Roxy Rimidon. Jack Santiago."

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"You scared me," he said, with a big grin, coming over to shake my hand. He must have been about sixty, very handsome and full of life. I was glad to meet him, and I wished he would go away.

"Well, Mahiri," he said, "I rushed in to catch you before you went home."

"You just caught me. Roxy and I are going to dinner."

Oh, please don't ask him, I silently implored her, knowing my mother so well, but she said to him, "Would you like to come along?"

"I'd love to. I came in to ask you to have dinner."

Smiling with satisfaction, my mother tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, and they went out together, not even looking to see if I were trailing them. I stumped along behind as mad as a ten-year-old, and ashamed of my feelings. Yes, indeed, I said to myself, it's about time some handsome, lively man just like this one married her, and then I'd always know where she was, and she'd always be there when I needed her. Infant Roxy Rimidon, howling for her mamma, I jeered at myself. I hadn't needed her for ten years, and she knew it.

Jack Santiago took care of the whole dinner, including the wine, and he was such a charming man that I was bound to be pleasant, though I hardly got a word in edgewise before dessert.

Mom finally got around to me and asked, "Have you ever seen Merle Rocca again?"

"Not since we left the Academy; I keep missing her at the psych checks. But she left a letter for me last time, she's a Lieutenant, or she was then, and returning to Vogl, where she's their darling. Doing great."

"I understand there's a lot of trouble with some Vogl groups," Jack said. "She must have her hands full."

"Yes, I guess so," I said, thinking: dear Jack, you are nice, but won't you go away now? He didn't, though, and kept us company right through the *chocolat pot de creme* and little cups of hot Sangrada we finished with. Then Mom said good night to him, and we went up to the monorail.

"Don't you live near the complex?" I asked her.

We swooped and dipped along with a tremendous view of the dancing city lights through the windows. "One of the privileges of my new office is that I can live wherever I please," she said. "It's only a few minutes, really, but right at the end of the line."

The minute we stepped out I could smell the sea, and standing there with my mother, the shock of nostalgia almost undid me.

"Come on," she said, taking my hand. She had a lovely three rooms

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on a bluff looking out over the water. There was a real sand and stone path from the walkway to her door. "I waited six months for this place to become vacant," she said. "I really hate living inland."

"I know," I said, more in sympathy than she realized. We kicked off shoes and boots and sat down in the living room. I had planned to sneak up gently on my subject, but having been bottled up all evening, I just spilled it out in a hurry.

"So you see, I don't want to embarrass the family," I finished up, "but I feel so strongly that we're wrong. I have to go to the meeting and speak for Vogl. Any situation which drives people to such insane extremes is wrong and needs to be changed."

"In other words, you think it's more important to bring young colonists in to your schools and training centers than to ship out the agricultural equipment and ship back the crops which support the colonies' economy. It is grand in theory, darling, but five or six years from now, what will you say to the Vogl farmers whose crops have failed? What will you say to the hungry children?"

"I don't propose we stop sending seed crops and equipment, only that we balance the shipments. We're forcing the Vogl economy to grow and flourish because we get so much out of it — who are we fooling? It's as much if not more for Earth's benefit. And it isn't paying off. We've got more and more bitter and resentful people joining the Vogl insurrectionists, and it's spreading to Alpha, too."

She drew her feet up and settled more comfortably on the couch. "Look, darling, you're only twenty-five and just a sergeant, but you are in the Planet Patrol Auxiliary. Sworn to keep the law and contain the mob and all that. And now you're going to an Inter-Dominion meeting to step out in front of all the council presidents and tell them the law is wrong and the order can't be kept."

"Yes," I said. "That's what I'm going to do, because that's the way I feel."

She closed her eyes and rubbed the back of her neck with one hand. I said, "We were always liberal in our family, and we always spoke up when we felt it was necessary."

I could see her swallow. I had dumped it all on her pretty fast. It was not that I was asking her permission, which would have been absurd for us both, only that I wanted her warned what I was going to do, and I hoped she would understand.

"Do you want to talk about your problems?" I offered.

"No, I do not," she snapped.

"I like Jack Santiago," I said.

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Her eyes flashed with rage. "Don't you dare meddle in my private life," she said. "Jack's a sweet, lovely man and the most awful bore I ever met."

She got up and asked, "Would you like a cup of tea before we go to sleeep?" She turned on the video to catch the news and went to the kitchen. I sat feeling tired and downcast and looked at the face on the screen: General Bistrup; hard, powerful, vital, a man with the force of a tidal wave, demanding, as usual, that the malcontents be dealt with severely, that the colony economy come first, before everything. As usual, in the same voice which had been coming over the video for more than a year, General Bistrup announced that everyone knew that young people could not think ahead, could not see far enough into the future to be allowed a voice in council plannings. You bloody old bore, I said to myself. Yet he was very persuasive.

Mom came in with two cups of purly tea, and we sat and sipped and listened to General Bistrup call for control, for logic, for sanity. "He's quite a man," mom said.

Since I couldn't admire him that much, I kept quiet.

"He'll be at the Inter-Dominion meeting," she said casually. "Will you address every word of your plea to him?" And she gave me a rather sly look, sideways, to see how I'd take that.

"I know what I'm up against. Even a man like that. He has got a golden tongue, hasn't he?"

"He's very intelligent, and he is deeply concerned with the future of all of us, Roxy. He is not selfish or seeking power for himself."

Astonished, I asked, "Do you know him personally?"

"Yes, quite well. I put in his left knee cap."

I gave an uncontrollable whoop of laughter. From coast to coast there was hardly a patella or radius or spinal fusion my mother, Dr. Mahiri Rimidon, had not had a hand in. Or so it seemed to me at that moment.

"You'd better get some sleep, and I need mine," mom said. "As far as your Uncle Wrexel goes, I think he'd be very hurt if you didn't stop off to see his glasshouses and have a chat with him. He was always fond of you and Gyro, and he won't be in the least embarrassed by anything you say. If I know him, he'll be delighted with your nerve."

We stood up, and mom came over to me and took both my hands gently in hers. "Roxy, darling, they'll probably cut you to little bits, but I'll be thinking of you and mentally holding your hand. In spite of the fact that I disagree with you entirely." She smiled at me.

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"You're a scale off the old fish," she said, as she often had, when all in the world I wanted to do was go down to the shelf farm with my father.

We were settling down to sleep when I asked her, "Does Uncle Wrexel's spine still creak in the cold?"

"I'll thank you not to remind me of one of my bitterest failures. But he doesn't go out much, and they keep him nice and comfortable in his office."

"It wasn't a failure, mom. It just had musical side effects."

"Oh, shut up," she said.

Most of the way over, northeast above the Atlantic toward the snow and ice-covered land mass of Inter-Dominion North, with the Greenland Sea on the other coast, and the Arctic Ocean flowing above it, I was rehearsing my grand speeches. As we neared the port, I felt frost entering me, and knew it was a reaction to being so keyed up. I kept seeing, in my mind's eye, the face of General Marion Bistrup, and I kept disciplining myself not to see it.

We came down close enough to see the cream-colored domes of the towns, nicknamed Fomedoms, below us and the sea, which was silver, with long, moving rivers of light working across it toward the shore. It was very cold and beautiful, and not at all like the southern waters I'd grown up near. There were still parts of this planet I didn't know, although that didn't lessen my desire to get off this planet and see the rest of the known universe. Probably I'd get my wish and wind up on a Vogl farm, knee-deep in steamy kelp for the next ten years.

A bus with snow treads took us to the hotel, where I would have to sign in before I could look up my Uncle Wrexel. I also signed my name in for the meeting, but if you wanted to get up and speak, you had to sign your name in a register and sit in a special section which gave you access to the floor.

Off duty, I didn't need to wear my uniform, but I had brought it. I couldn't decide whether I should wear it or not. I was afraid that if I didn't wear it, I would be accused of trying to speak as a private citizen. A Patrol member is not a private citizen, that's understood even by small children. Patrol members belong to their planet full of people. Anyhow, I had signed in as Sgt. Roxy Rimidon and had seen it posted on the wall plate where guests were listed.

I got myself settled, with my uniform hung neatly in the closet, and went to inquire about the glasshouses. "Take a jitney," I was advised. "They run every twenty minutes."

The jitneys were as small and

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lightweight as toys, seating six people besides the driver, and we kept sinking, rising up over mounds, sinking again. It was a strange feeling. The short day was coming to an end, and all around the snow was streaked with blue ink where the shadows were visibly lengthening. The glass towers were washed with a tangerine fire, and of course nothing could be seen through that, and I had to imagine the conveyor belts carrying the plants all the way up to the top, then down, then up, ceaselessly.

I was wearing a standard foam parka suit, and it was only a short walk from the jitney stop to the sealed door of the office building at the base of the glass tower, but it felt absolutely desolate, and I imagined that the cold was cutting through to my bones.

Uncle Wrexel was in his deep, wide chair, which had a special back support built into it. He had gone quite grey, though his shoulders were still bony and broad, and he looked as much like his brother, my father, as he always had.

He didn't know me at first. "Why, Roxy," he said, after he had gazed and gazed at me. "Are you on duty?"

"No. I came for the meeting. How are you?"

"Wonderful! Have you heard about my cucumber?"

"Your cucumber is famous everywhere," I said. He hooked one foot into a flat plastic stool and drew it over near him so I sat down by his knee. He took my chin in his hand and looked hard at me.

"How's that tumbling brother of yours?"

"He's fine. And mom sends her love."

"Do you want to tell me why you're here? I know it isn't just to see me, though I'm glad you stopped by."

"I came to speak for Vogl. I hope you aren't shocked."

"I haven't been shocked for years," he said, rather dreamily. "Not even by a cucumber with carotene. Well, that's nice. You young people must stick together, or the fuddies will eat everything up."

It was hard to tell whether he was becoming senile or whether he meant exactly what he said. There was no particular expression on his face to help me.

"What are you working on now?" I asked.

"Snap beans, my dear. Snap beans which will grow with their roots in bog, at a temperature of one hundred and five degrees."

"For use on Vogl," I said.

"Well, of course. They have to eat, don't they?" There was an open microfilm screen on the desk, and he switched the light off and

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swung part way round in his mobile chair. "You don't think snap beans very important," he remarked.

"Food is terribly important," I said. "No food, no people. On the other hand, no people, no need for food."

"Quite so," he said, dreamy again. "I shan't be at the meeting, I never go. When it's all over, will you come and have dinner with me?"

"If I'm still in one piece, Uncle Wrexel, nothing would please me more."

"Good girl," he said. Then suddenly there was nothing at all senile or dreamy about his sharpness. "One must ask for food, Roxy, but one must never beg for crumbs. It's bad for the stomach, and it's rotten politics." Then he swung his chair back to the desk, and I could see I was dismissed.

Night had clapped down its lid on this part of the world. I worked my way back into the parka jacket while I stood at the door, looking out at the jitney stop, waiting for the flashing blue light which would indicate a jitney was there. I'd hardly gotten into the parka when the blue light showed. Perhaps they ran more frequently this time of evening.

I went through the inner doors, then through the air-sealed outer lock, and ran because I didn't like the way the black cold made me feel. The jitney door was opened for me by some kind passenger, and I tumbled in. Both my arms were yanked up behind me and a wrist as hard as iron held my throat so tightly I'd have strangled if I tried to speak. Stupidly, I said to myself: out of the frying pan, into the fire. It was the only warm image I could come up with.

The glass heights of my Uncle Wrexel's domain faded behind us. My hands were secured and my ankles tied tightly before my throat was released. I coughed, and my breath rasped.

"Shut up," somebody said.

The jitney went eerily up and down, soft as a cloud. We passed the dome that housed the hotel and its complex of shops and restaurants. It seemed to me we circled a lot, and then we bored straight at a far dome. An air-sealed gateway opened, and the jitney plunged in, on through an open-way which slid shut behind us. When we stopped, I was lifted out and carried over a man's shoulder.

"My God," he said, "she weighs a ton. Somebody give me a hand." He took my arms, someone else took my ankles, and they hauled me off like a package. Along a corridor only dimly lit. Through a doorway into a well-lighted room, where I was dumped on the floor and shucked out of my foam parka

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suit. Half a dozen peole were sitting in the room. All of them wore the Vogl trousers, cut and folded in below the knee. Their skins, of different colors, all had that soft look produced by years of the Vogl climate.

A big man with his hair cut so close his head looked shaven came over and boosted me up to my feet and sort of fed me into a chair. He said, "What a nice piece of luck. A Patrol with a relative in just the right spot. How was your uncle?"

"He is fine, thank you," I said, thinking they hadn't lost a second's time in identifying me and tracking me down.

"How do you think he'd do, dumped out into the snow? He doesn't get around too good, does he?"

"I can't see the point of dumping him out into the snow before he's finished up those bog beans for you," I retorted. "I don't see what he has to do with this at all."

"He's just a handle," the big man said. "He's just the handle we hold you by. Now!" He leaned forward from his chair, with an elbow on each knee. "You are a sweet piece of luck. If you didn't happen to bring your uniform along, we can supply you with one. A perfect copy, that is."

"For what?"

Another man leaned in to our conversation, thin, sharp-faced, with the big, calloused hands of a farmer. "For you to stand up at the meeting and tell them we're right. You've had an inside look. Our kids have to have free access to your planet, and we have to build and staff our own Academies. And most of all, we have to have some decent universities."

My rage and frustration were so great I could have cried. "You fools," I shouted. "You damn stupid fools, what do you think I came here for?"

The looks of surprise and suspicion ran like fire around the room. I went on yelling at them. "Did you really think I made such an expensive trip to see my Uncle Wrexel? And you see what you've done, you stupid bastards? You've ruined it. I won't stand and speak for you now, because it'll stink of a setup. Because somebody will find out, and any chance you had of solving this will go right down the drain. I'm so mad I could kill you. You stupid —" my mouth was shut by a knuckled blow from the big man's hand. It split my lip, and blood ran down my chin.

Another voice said, "She means it." The woman who had come in took off her parka and threw it on a chair. I knew her. It was Reba, who had been shipped back to Vogl on probation.

"I know Roxy Rimidon. If she

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says she came to speak for Vogl, then she means it."

"She'll speak for us," the thin man said grimly.

"Oh, no, I won't," I said. "You go right ahead and shoot me on the spot, but I won't say a word for you now."

The big man gave a theatrical sigh. "That takes care of Uncle Wrexel. Poor old thing crawling about on the ice and gasping his last. I bet that synthetic spine pops wide open in the cold. Nasty way to go."

They would do it if they thought it would help. I said, "He's old, and he's been successful. I imagine he's going to die soon anyway."

Another man got up, and said, "Come on, we're not getting anywhere this way. I have some much better ideas. Want to put her in the supply closet, or shall we go around to the bar?"

They decided to go around to the bar. My ankles were tied again, and my wrists were firmly attached in back of me to the chair so I could wriggle but not go anywhere. They all went out except Reba, who stalked over and stared at me.

"Were you really going to stick your neck out for us?" she asked. "You know it' very hard to believe."

"I was."

"I'm sorry they cooked it. I know you, you'll let them drop your uncle into the snow, and you'll let them cut you up in pieces, but you won't do it now, will you? You're so young and stupid and idealistic."

"Thanks," I said.

"They're flatheads," she snarled. "It was our last resort, to get someone, some public person, to speak up for us." She rubbed her hair with both hands, staring away at the wall. "I don't know what to do now. There's got to be some better way, or at least some way out of this."

"I have an idea," I said.

"I bet you have."

"It would help."

"You expect me to trust you?"

"Have you got a choice?" I asked. "Are you really all out for Vogl, or like the others, just for yourself? This is the second time you've been on a really bad deal."

"Soft-hearted Reba," she sneered at herself. "What else could I do? And they aren't all selfish. They want as much for Vogl as I do."

"'I've got an idea," I repeated.

She went across the room and picked her parka up. "Yes, I'll bet," she said, throwing the parka over her shoulders. "Something really great that'll get us all life on a bog farm."

"Not more than two years," I said rashly.

"You! Okay, what is this great idea of yours?"

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"Cut me loose. Get me into a jitney, and over to council headquarters. We'll go in there together and tell them just what happened, how I came on my own to speak for Vogl and some of you thought it would be a good idea to put pressure on me. That way, I can still get up and speak, on my own."

"You're crazy, Patty girl. You're quite crazy. You want me to walk into that lion's den? And how can you prove you came on your own and you aren't just acting because of the pressure we put on?"

"My mother knows why I came."

"Your mother!" She gave a whoop of derisive laughter and disappeared out the door, which hissed shut behind her. A moment later, the lights went out. Evidently they thought I might have second thoughts, sitting by myself in the dark.

In a short time I discovered the lights weren't the only thing turned off. It was getting cold. My parka suit was on the other side of the room. If there had been any light, I could have seen my breath. Well, freezing to death wasn't as bad as being chopped up.

About the time the cold began to hurt me, making me ache all over, and just before a nice numbness could come and relieve me, the air slowly began to warm. Were they going to alternately thaw and freeze me until I gave up?

As warm as it finally grew, the warmth didn't come back to my hands, which must have turned dark blue. My feet didn't feel too wonderful, either. The dark remained. Except for my hands and feet I grew quite comfortable, and even rather sleepy, and was nodding off into a doze when I realized how cool the air was getting. Right enough, they were going to give me a good dose of the climate until I hollered for mercy.

I heard the door open. The person came very softly across the room and bent over, and expecting a blow, I drew back in the chair.

"You promise me only two years?" Reba whispered.

"I can't promise you that. I'm very likely to get a few years on a prison farm myself."

"You knew that when you came. You risked that, because you knew we were right."

"That's no help now."

She was quiet for a moment, and then I could feel her working my bonds loose. She said, "That bunch is crazier than I thought, they're even talking about puncturing the dome wall during the meeting. I think if you speak on your own, it'll do a hundred times more good than anything they cook up, and if you risked it, I can. Can you stand up?"

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I could stand, but I couldn't use my hands at all. She had to dress me in the foam parka, handling me like a baby, and we were trying hard to be quiet. I did my best not to shuffle, but she kept whispering, "Sh, sh, can't you pick your feet up, you ox." She had me by one arm, leading me from the room.

The corridor was the longest I ever walked, but as we went, me shuffling and Reba shushing me, the feeling slowly came back to my feet, and the ends of my fingers tingled fiercely with returning life. The open-way door was noisy as it rose and we fled through it, toward the jitney which stood just inside the lock.

"Where the hell is it?" Reba muttered frantically, seeking the panel button that would let us out. I got into the jitney, next to the driver's seat, and waited for her. There was the hiss of the sealed door opening, and she tumbled in beside me and got the jitney going. So fast, in fact, that we nearly turned over as we hit the snow.

Reba asked, "Is your mother somebody? Would they take her word about you?"

"I don't know. She's head of the bone bank in her area, but I hate to involve her."

"Look, Patty, I don't care who you involve, but make it good and make sure they believe you. It's my neck, too, now."

"Glad I didn't throttle it the last time we met," I said.

"I'd like to see you try. I've had as much training as you have, and when we open our first Academy, I intend to be at the top."

"Then decontaminate your temper," I said. "You'd be surprised how aggravating a class of rookies can be."

We came to the regular jitney stop in front of council headquarters and got out and stampeded up the path and through the two sets of doors. A councilman on guard demanded our identials.

"Sergeant Roxy Rimidon, Planet Patrol Auxiliary, and Reba Smith," she poked me in outrage at that one, "Vogl Youth Council."

"Never heard of the Youth Council," he said. "Who do you want to see?"

"Who's Council Coordinator for this meeting?"

"You're kidding," he said. "At this time of the night?"

"It's a serious emergency," Reba said quietly.

He turned to the communicator and put through a call. There was a video screen, but it remained blank, although from the transmitter came a voice I could swear I knew. "What do you want, Councilman?"

"Two women here, sir. One says she's Planet Patrol. They say it's an emergency."

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"Check for weapons and send them up."

We got out of our foam suits. He took one look at me and demanded, "Where's your uniform?"

"In my hotel room." I gave him the number so he could check it out if he wanted to.

"Okay, you go on up. Take the escalator to the third floor, turn right, it's the gold rosette door."

As we stood on the escalator, Reba muttered, "I wish I hadn't done this. I know I'm in for trouble. I feel it in my bones. I wish I hadn't done this."

"But you are going to do it," I said.

"What makes you think so?"

"Because I know you as well as you know me."

We came to the door with the gold rosette on it and paused to look at each other. "You aren't going to back out now," I said angrily.

"No, and neither are you, Patty."

We were told to come in. Tall, powerful, stern, there stood General Marion Bistrup. There was no smile on the face of that tiger.

Reba said, "Good evening, sir. We're sorry to bother you."

"If you're going to waste my time being sorry, then get out," he said. "Which of you pretends to be a Patrol woman?"

I took a step toward him. "Sergeant Roxy Rimidon, sir. How's that new patella?"

He gaped. Then shut his mouth with an audible snap. "None of your impertinent damn business," he said. "However, I'll accept your indentification for the moment. What is it?"

Nobody sat down. He stood at ease, if you could call that iron stance easy, and we stood stiffly in front of him. Reba collected herself and in a quiet voice began to tell him the story. He never moved a muscle or raised his eyes to her face, until she had told him of how I had come to speak at the meeting.

Then he looked at me and asked, "Is this true?"

"Yes, sir. I felt I must speak."

"You have a right to speak at an Inter-Dominion meeting, no matter what you say. But don't expect sympathy. You are a member of the Planet Patrol, and it is your duty to maintain our laws. You were trained for it at public expense. If you wish to be associated with insurrectionists, some of whom have committed murder and most of whom have loudly cried out for the overthrow of the existing order, then you will get exactly what you deserve. You can expect no mercy."

"I didn't come for mercy. I came to speak for something I believe in."

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He snorted. "Get out of here, both of you. I hope not to see either of you again, but I suppose I'll be seeing Rimidon in all her infantile glory on the floor of the meeting. Personally, I think we should be more strict about who is allowed to speak."

"Sir, you can't mean that," I said in a soft and swooning voice. "You are the torch which lights the way for all those who believe in our way of life. I may not agree with you, sir, but I certainly respect —"

"Crap!" he roared. "You treasoner, don't you come in here and butter me up. Get out of my sight!"

"Yes, sir," I said, backing off. "Can we protect Reba Smith, who has disassociated herself from those gangsters, to help us to do this the honorable way?"

He stared at me, incredulous and furious. "Are you asking me for amnesty?"

"Not for myself. But she came willingly, knowing that she runs the risk of a long prison sentence. If she's not protected, they'll murder her."

"Damn you," the commander said. "You silly, stupid kids, messing about in serious affairs, you're nothing but a pack of idiots." He went over to the communicator and put through a call. "Fix up something for two females. Get them beds, somewhere. Somewhere where they can't get out, or get at the young men, or into trouble. If it's got bars or an electric door, that's all the better. Get up here on the double and take them away."

When he'd finished that, he looked over at me again. "Did you bring a uniform or were you going to sneak in as a private citizen?"

"My uniform is at the hotel."

"Very good. That way, you can bring total disgrace on the whole Patrol, instead of just yourself." A very peculiar expression crossed his angry face for an instant. "Not to mention your family. You come from a decent family, and I regret that your actions must inevitably reflect on them."

"Fudge," I said. "You know my mother disagrees heartily with me, and nothing I do or say will reflect badly on her. I speak on my own, sir, and you know it."

A councilman came in, and Commander Bistrup said, "Remove these," to him.

We were removed. Down, down, into the depths of the dome building, where we were locked into an austere room which had two cots, a toilet and basin, and no windows. "Better than the cold, cold grave," I said cheerfully.

"Did you have to be so rude to him?"

"He was casting aspersions on my mother."

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"He did it on purpose."

"I know he did it on purpose."

"With your big mouth, I don't see how you've lasted this long in Patrol. You're done for now, aren't you?"

"Right. Done for. Have to go shelf fishing, I guess. I always wanted to, anyway."

"Cold, cold, grave," she said reflectively, sitting on a cot and working her boots off. "You know, on Vogl if we aren't careful where we bury people, the underground ferments and bubbles them up, an arm or a leg at a time."

I almost fell for it. When I laughed, Reba said, "While you're out on the floor having such a good time tomorrow, what do you think will be happening to me?"

"I think you'll be sitting with the other auditors, hanging onto my every word. Reba, now that we've done this, why don't we stop mean-mouthing each other and act like friends?"

"Don't butter me up," she said.

"I'm not buttering you, you bog balloon. I'm serious."

She unbuttoned her shirt and threw it across the end of the cot. "It would be nice to believe you. But I don't."

"Sweet dreams," I said.

The light remained on in the little room, and so we pulled our single blankets up over our ears and eyes. But after a minute, I pulled the blanket off my face and said, "Reba, why did you get mixed up with those people a second time?"

"Because I'm stupid," she said.

"No, you're not. You're as smart as they come. I really would like to know."

"How can you know? You've never been in my position, and there are plenty like me. We used to try speaking out and writing communiques and all the proper methods. Nothing at all happened. It was like whistling in deep space. Not even an air current."

I wasn't sure of her physics, but the frustration was clear. In a thin voice she added, "You wait, Roxy. I've got a feeling that one day you'll know just the position I'm in."

"Were you ever charged with any offense?"

"No, I was just on probation, after that little caper when we met. What are you doing now, calling in an obligation?"

She was beginning to get under my skin, and rather than get into a real quarrel with her, I pulled the blanket up over my head.

In the morning we were both awake when a councilman unlocked our door and came in with my uniform. He handed it to me and went out without a word. "On an empty stomach," I complained. "They might at least bring us breakfast."

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Reba watched me as I dressed. When I tucked the pantaloons into the tops of my boots, she said, "Our uniforms are just like that, only green, and wetboots, of course."

"You mean you even have your uniforms designed?"

"We're full of dreams," she said sadly.

A few minutes later we were led away but, to our pleasant surprise, were taken to a mess hall. They isolated us in a corner, but there was plenty of food, and we fell to ravenously.

A plastic replica of my Uncle Wrexel's yellow cucumber was displayed on the wall. I said to Reba, "I'm glad he's okay and your friends didn't have a chance at him. He hasn't quite worked out your bog beans yet, but he will, given a chance."

"You really come from a dazzling family," Reba said. "Here comes our jailie."

The councilman led us out. We were given our foam suits, we dressed, and were taken to a jitney. It was all very formal, and silent.

The Inter-Dominion meeting was held in a dome of its own, the center of which contained a huge auditorium with audio and video stations built in around the walls. Not a word was said in there, not a gesture made, which was not broadcast for everyone to hear, see, and discuss. It was the working heart that circulated blood through the ten Dominions of Earth and the colony planets of Alpha and Vogl. The left hand knew what the right hand did; the foot did not move without the knowledge of the rib; the lungs did not breathe without the cooperation of the whole body.

Neither of us had ever been to a meeting. Reba found her way upstairs to the auditor's seats; I was politely shown to a seat in the speakers' section. Mine was the only Patrol uniform in the place, and I sat with my boots pulled in under me, feeling as if my cap weighed fifty pounds on my head.

The council presidents came in and took their seats in a semicircle facing us. General Bistrup and several other high-ranking Patrol officers came in last and took their seats while the recording machinery began to give off a hum of busyness, and the meeting began.

There was no formality, but no rude interruptions. Some of the talk was abstract in the extreme; other speakers came clearly to a definite point. The matter of Vogl discontent was discussed at length and in every tone from hot to cold.

Several presidents felt it was time changes were made; all of these men and women spoke for more student exchange, for another real university on Vogl. The president of this meeting, a councilman from Africa Dominion,

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turned and asked if anyone wanted to speak for the public.

I got up. My uniform was noted, and a murmur went through the auditorium. "Gentlemen," I began.

There was the ear splitting high shriek of Vogl triumph from one of the gallery seats; another murmur and some laughter ran through the crowd. Thank you, Reba, I thought, and started to shake. I'd been all right until she encouraged me.

"Gentlemen," I said, again, "I have no sympathy for the groups who try to bludgeon us into action, but I speak for those who want the action and feel no one cares, or listens."

"Do you speak as a Patrol member?" one councilman asked.

"Yes, sir, I must. I am a Patrol member and not a private citizen."

"Have you been in action against some of the Vogl extremists?" another one asked.

"Yes, sir."

"We know who she is," General Bistrup said. "Let her say what she wants."

The first councilman cut in with: "I'm curious to know how a Planet Patrol member comes to speak for the very same revolutionary forces she has been trained to control."

"If you let her speak, we may find out," another one said.

There was silence, and I went on. "The Vogl claim to need Patrol Academies of their own is valid. They know their own planet, the physical conditions under which all Vogls must live, and they have plenty of active, intelligent young people to be trained for that purpose. I speak for the immediate establishment of one or more Planet Patrol Academies on Vogl, to be staffed by Earth Patrol instructors until enough Vogls have learned our training methods to staff their own Academies. That shouldn't take more than two years. I think the freighter space must be found to ship such a teaching staff, with its full equipment, to Vogl, and I think the space would be better used for this purpose, right now, than for shipments of hybrid chicken eggs or bog beans."

Councilmen began to talk to each other, hot and cold, loud and soft, and I was left standing there, wondering how much of the Earth public was with me, if any. I felt very damn lonesome.

The Scandia Dominion councilman who had spoken to me first, asked, "Sergeant, as a fully trained member of Planet Patrol, do you think the Vogls are ready for their own?"

"It's past time for them, sir. And we have enough to do at home. It would take a burden off our own Patrol members if we weren't always being shipped out to clean

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up trouble on some other planet."

That was stretching it a bit, since most of us would give our eye teeth for off-planet duty.

More discussion. The meeting president, as a kind of afterthought, turned his face toward me and said, "If you've finished speaking, you might as well sit down."

I was grateful to collapse in my seat. Most of what I planned to say had gone out of my head. I wondered if my mother had the meeting tuned in. Probably too busy putting in some ribs or ordering another quart of marrow, or, considering the time difference, having dinner with Jack Santiago, that charming but terrible bore. I didn't think he was so bad. I thought my mother would be happy with him.

"The meeting is recessed until after lunch," the president said, and everyone got up and began moving out. I looked around for my jailer, and someone tapped me on the back. A councilman was standing there. "Come along, Sergeant. General Bistrup wants to talk with you."

There goes my head, I thought. I glanced back into the gallery, where Reba was standing with our jailer at her side. She raised her palm outward in the ancient pantomime of friendship and was taken away.

I followed the councilman around in back of the semicircle of seats, out an exit door, down another of those corridors where every sound was magnified and echoed as if we were in the bowels of the earth.

I was shown into a room where General Bistrup, with several councilmen, was already seated. A blue Patrol dossier cover lay on a table, and I was sure it was mine.

Before anyone got a chance to speak, General Bistrup said, "I want you to know that I disapprove. I think we are far too hasty. I do not think the word or opinion of a junior female Patrol member should influence council presidents."

"Now, Marion," the Scandia Dominion councilman said. "You've already been outvoted."

That made me curious, for no voting had yet taken place.

"I don't have to like it," the General replied. "As long as I'm in uniform, I'll say what I think is the truth."

That was one of those weird statements which now and then struck my sensitivity as both grotesque and hilarious. Though I supposed it was a good thing he had the uniform on and thus was forced to speak his truth.

They seated me formally in a large chair. A thoughtful silence fell. Drops of it fell on the back of

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my neck, which began to creep. It was cruel and unusual treatment, as far as I was concerned.

One of the councilmen finally said, "Sergeant, it's just as well that you spoke today. Though you jumped us."

Without moving my head, I rolled my eyes to see him. He was looking at me with interest and curiosity. He went on, "We had already decided some time ago that we'd establish an Academy on Vogl this year. And the first shipment of educational computer components for their new university has already gone out. It was not to be made public until later."

Then I, and Reba, had gone to the chopper for nothing. And so much for the myth that all decisions were arrived at during public meetings. I was young, and stupid, and gullible, and idealistic.

"As Councilman David said," another voice came in, "we're glad you did speak. It gives us a voice from the public, to help us."

I opened my mouth to protest, and someone said, "Be quiet, Sergeant."

General Bistrup looked at me coldly in the eyes and said, "I disapprove, but I must comply. At least we'll be able to keep an eye on you, Rimidon." He turned to the others. "It's time she met her superior officer for her next assignment."

They opened the door and in came a captain. She was slim and wiry, with one blue eye and one brown. Her blue Patrol uniform had been adapted to Vogl, with the pantaloons cut in under the knee and folded into shiny black wetboots. Her cap sat at a rakish angle on her black curls. Captain Merle Rocca acknowledged my presence with a raised eyebrow.

"Gentlemen," she said, politely inclining her head to the gathering.

General Bistrup asked, "Captain, are you sure Rimidon won't be too sympathetic toward the wrong people?"

"I'm sure, sir. She has a good record and a cool head."

That seemed to be all there was to it, for the councilmen quietly got up and departed. Merle said to me, "I'll see you in room 38 for briefing in half an hour, Rimidon."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. She nearly winked at me, but not quite.

Behind me, General Bistrup said, "Sergeant, you just stay here for a moment. I want to speak with you."

I stood there until the room emptied, then swung around and said, "Sir, what about Reba? Can she be returned to Vogl? She'd make a first-class Planet Patrol Auxiliary."

"You discuss that with Captain Rocca," he said heavily. There was

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a video on the table, and he set the controls. When the screen lighted, he began putting through a private call, referring to a note to get the series of numbers correct. Then he beckoned me over to the table. I stood there and was just close enough to see my mother's face appear on the screen.

She opened her reception line and smiled out. "Hello, darling," she said. It took me a full moment to realize she couldn't see me, where I was standing, and the darling was not me at all.

I stifled an exclamation. General Bistrup took me by the arm, not roughly, but no gentleness, either, and drew me into my mother's line of vision. "Oh, hello, *darling,*" my mother said.

I looked up at his face. He avoided my look and spoke to mom. "Here she is, Mahiri. We're shipping her out to Vogl as fast as possible. Just as we always have done with troublemakers."

"Oh, I'm so glad she got the assignment," mom said. Her eyes focused on me. "I wasn't sure they'd select you, but I did know Merle was heading up the staff, and how pleased you'd be. Good luck, Roxy."

General Bistrup said, "Mahiri, which of us should tell her?"

"You don't need to, either of you," I said. "I don't approve, but I will comply."

"Don't pull that on me," roared. "Just because I marry your mother doesn't mean you get a single special privilege."

"No, sir, it doesn't," I agreed. I turned back to the screen and said to mom, "I'll see you when we come back."

"Good-by, darling. And don't be too antagonistic toward the other point of view. I always thought you too liberal, myself."

"Good-by," I said, to both of them, and went out.

Merle was in the lounge with a young lieutenant named Riker Paisley and an older man, Captain Ben Slane. He had a round face and almost no eyebrows, which gave him a pompous look, but when he smiled, it was with friendly warmth. After we were introduced, Merle added, "You three are the advance staff."

Lt. Paisley poured me a drink and Capt. Slane pulled up a chair for me. "You'll go on ahead to set up Academy classes, and I'll join you in a few weeks," Merle said. "Right now, we've got two weeks of hard work and planning before you get into space."

I blurted, "Wait a minute. I have a friend from Vogl who's going to be a lot of help to us, but she's in lockup here."

"Charged with something?"

"No, just being held."

Merle got on the communi-

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cator, was switched four times to different areas, and finally tracked Reba down and ordered her release.

"Merle," I said.

"What now, Roxy?"

"How long have you known about the Vogl Academy?"

The others looked bored. Merle said, "A week, maybe two."

"I always thought these things were decided at the Inter-Dominion meetings."

"They are, aren't they? You heard them discussing it this morning, and you got up and spoke."

"But —"

"Oh, grow up, Roxy." She opened an enormous folder of papers, at which the others groaned.

We might be working in a system that was the best yet, but it sure as hell wasn't good enough. Not yet. "I'm growing," I said, but my captain was too busy distributing our orders to hear me.

A hard blow on my temple brought me up from deep sleep to astonished wakefullness. Instead of playing possum to find out who was doing me in, I raised my head abruptly and received a second blow, which caused me to slide sideways out of the bunk to the cold metal floor. Then I lay there cursing my stupidity, cursing the freighter, cursing my assignment to Vogl, and most of all, my idiocy in mistaking the bulkhead for an attacker.

The door of the tiny cabin opened, and even in silhouette I recognized Lt. Riker Paisley, a lean man with a face both sad and humorous; sad eyes, humor lines at eye corners and around the mouth.

I lay there in the light that streamed in and wondered whether, to complete the picture, I should weep.

"What are you doing?" Rike inquired in a mild voice.

I raised myself on one elbow, aware of the bruising blows I'd received in my restless sleep from the bulkhead which curved over the narrow bunk. "Oh, I'm just lying here thinking things over," I said.

He touched on the light and came near me. No boots, just socks pulled up over his bony ankles, and his uniform trousers flopping loose above the socks. His shirt was unbuttoned over his hairy chest. "What are you doing, Sergeant?" he repeated.

I sat up, and looked at his feet.

"Bunk too small?" he asked. "Roll off, did you?"

"That's just what happened, but I'm ashamed to admit it."

He laughed and gave me a lift to my feet. "Roxy, I've already done the same damn thing twice. Go back to sleep."

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He touched off the light and went out. I climbed back into the bunk and pulled the allcover up over my ears. The crew was sullen, the food terrible, and we were getting nerves and fidgets as the trip lengthened out toward Vogl. Except Reba, who was glad to be going home, and kept promising to show us the sights, including the fermenting cemeteries.

The ship was loaded with cargo, most of it hybrid grains which would probably rot in Vogl's squashy soil before germination. Passenger quarters were little more than closets, with metal bunk. Crew, passengers, officers, all got the same accommodations. The galley was a joke: two ultraboxes, a bottomless supply of krilbits, and a faucet I'd never been allowed to touch. Capt. Ben Slane swore you could get oil from the faucet for a robot crew, as no human crew could be induced to take the trip twice.

At breakfast the third day out, Ben had raised his almost invisible eyebrows and muttered, "Stuff your krilbits."

"Sure," cookie had replied obligingly, and at lunch we had been served tough little pastry pouches stuffed with krilbits. Such were the luxuries of the *Sun Dial.*

Rike had wondered, "What do they do with Important People on these trips?"

Ben said, "Tank them, of course."

Although life immersion tanks were still in the research stage, the subject was likely to come up on these trips. Meanwhile, the only help, for those who wanted it, was a slowdown drug. As we were supposed to be spending the time discussing the problems of setting up a Vogl Patrol Academy, we were perfectly clear headed and free to bitch about the conditions. We spent a lot of time playing chess, and I got to know and like Riker Paisley. Sometimes we'd just communicate with our eyes: I like you. I looked forward to working with him. In fact, I looked forward to working.

At one breakfast, Reba said cheerily, "Wait until you taste tilapia chowder."

"I can't wait," Ben said. "Do you have any booze?"

Mock-scandalized, Reba demanded, "You mean on board?"

"He means do you make your own on Vogl," Rike said, spooning up the puddinglike breakfast food.

"We make everything we need," Reba said darkly.

"You are going out in the field with me, aren't you?" I asked.

"I wouldn't dare let you go alone. On those rare occasions when we get a Patty in the field, there is nothing but grief. I told you before, the first thing they do is fall

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into a bog, or collapse from the heat, or meet up with some indigenous life form and get a head nipped off."

"Has that ever really happened?" I asked, though of course I'd heard about scaly Vogl reptiles before.

"It only happened once. The first time a Patrol group came. We talked about having the sergeant's headless body stuffed and put in our museum, but decided against it."

"Pity," I said.

"Stop worrying. Those big reptiles are as dumb as they come, and they're not aggressive; they only bite if you get between them and their food."

This was about the only real information we could pry out of Reba. She refused to answer questions of practical value, saying we'd have to form our own impressions and she didn't want to influence us. Several times she referred to what she called "local problems," but wouldn't identify them. She just said, "Oh, you'll become familiar with them in no time." Confined as the four of us were in such small quarters, her attitude did nothing to make us happy and relaxed.

During the last dinner before touchdown, Reba said, "Wait'll you see Bluebeard's Castle." But by this time no one would rise to her bait any more, and we just glowered at her over our hulled wheat and kril fritters.

The port was on a high plateau west of the major body of water, Azure Ocean. Azure it was, close to the overgrown green shore; farther out, it darkened to cobalt. It was rich with life, both nutritious and poisonous.

A group of men were loading freight onto another ship, readying it for take off, and some dark, stocky boys unloaded freight from the *Sun Dial.* The ground was hard but crunchy, composed of millions of broken shells. The buildings were long, flat structures with permaflex screening and huge roof drains to carry off the gallons of water from the frequent storms. Behind the port, the mountains were a dark, vivid green. One faintly smoking cone told of recent volcanic activity. The air was hot, wet, and smelly, though we passed through zones of sluggishly moving air which smelled very sweet.

We were all struck by the quiet, the miles and miles of dense green growth. Across the ocean, distances were pale blue stained with lavender. And beyond that, far to the south, lay another land mass, with its own capital town of Bragby, where the new university was being set up.

We passed the packing houses, where Vogl's perishable food-

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stuffs were cryotransferred before shipment. One building was labeled: MEDICAL, and I asked Reba about it.

"That's where organs and tissue are stored; we never ship any out. There's a lot more demand for them on a recently settled planet than you could imagine at home."

We reached the shell flats where half a dozen small helicars were parked, and got into one, with Reba at the controls. She said, "When we pass over Gill Glade, we may find some kids having a ceremony there, and I'd like to stop for you to see it."

"What kind of ceremony?" Ben asked.

"A disapproved one, I can assure you. We have a group of people who call themselves Dust Bowlers."

Rike snorted. "They'll have to go some to find dust around here. What is it, some kind of religion?"

Reba set the helicar in motion, and we rose above the port. "It's religion and politics both. We used to think they were harmless-crazy, but we turned out to be wrong. You'll see."

Once in the air, everything below showed solid green, no sign of a port, a town, a glade or opening. It didn't look as if there were a single place in this world to put a helicar down. We were flying parallel with the great mountain range; puffs of dark smoke rose occasionally from Mt. Kesthar, which was still active. Down toward the equatorial line stood bare volcanic peaks which still erupted, and miles of lava beds, but the port and northern capital of Davvis were well above the major eruption zones.

"We just get occasional tremors," Reba explained.

The helicar began to slope down. We couldn't see anything, but evidently Reba did. "Gill Glade," she said. "They usually come out around noon. They don't mind spectators as long as no one interferes or shows disapproval. But you must keep quiet. If you think they respect your blue uniforms, you're wrong."

The helicar went on down toward what appeared to be solid growth, and I could see Rike gritting his teeth in anticipation of a crash. A band of pale green appeared, then a band of lettuce yellow, opening out. Whether it was cleared or a natural opening, we couldn't tell. We could see some figures in a circle. Reba brought the helicar down at one end of the glade, and we got out, careful to be quiet. None of the people so much as glanced at us. Some of them were in their teens, but most of them were around my age.

"I put the fat bowl down," the tall man said, and did so, in the center of the glade.

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"He puts the fat bowl down," the people said.

"I put the three stems down," the small girl said.

"She puts the three stems down," said the people.

"I put down the dust," said the tall man.

"I put down the shadow of dust," said the small girl.

"They put down the dust, they put down the shadow of dust, they put down that which dries up the wet, that which holds back the cloud, that which shapes the land firm," the people said.

It was the mindless expression of the faces that I found scary. We stood at the end of the glade and watched them perform what looked like primitive god-magic. In itself, it was harmless, a form of entertainment, or of release. But the people taking part in it looked severe and withdrawn; they weren't having fun or giving thanks; they were working desperately hard at something they felt desperately serious about. If too many young Vogl citizens participated in this kind of thing, putting bowls on the ground and chanting about dust, they'd become completely detached from practical means of making the wet, boggy planet habitable.

When I whispered this thought to Reba, she said, "That's it. That's exactly it. They've turned against any kind of technology, even against the hybrid animals and foods which keep us alive, saying they're unholy. They want the planet left just as it was found and claim they can live off it their own way."

The tall man chanted: "Dust of man, dust of god, dust of ashes," and sprinkled some dust around the bowl. The group made similar sprinkling motions, though they held nothing but air in their fingers. "Dust," they murmured. "Dust!" they sang. "DUST!" they cried, sprinkling the invisible particles.

As the ceremony seemed to be winding down on this monotonous note, we silently crowded back into the helicar for the rest of the journey, passing over miles of green. Patches and splotches of blue: ponds and small lakes. The quaking pale green of bogs. Mountains, hills, and green, green, green. It made my eyes ache.

Davvis had a mayor named Jimmy Kim, a theater, a ball field (broken shell packed hard, keep your face off it when you slide home), a general hospital, and on the outskirts to the north, built up high above bog pools, the Vogl School of Agriculture.

To east and west spread the hard-worked terrace farms, each with its fresh water pool of tilapia fish. One pair of tilapia produced two thousand fingerlings a month;

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the mature fish weighed about seven pounds, were resistant to the native fungus diseases, and would breed in fresh or brackish water. Best of all, they subsisted very well on such waste matter as cereal hulls, cut grasses, and leaves. Everybody's dream food, the tilapia were. They could be ground into a tasteless, odorless meal which might even be added to spaghetti before it was baked, to boost the protein value. Hairless hybrid goats were the only other source of animal protein, though a certain variety of rabbit was being tried.

On the higher terraces, new kinds of rice were being tested. Topmost, behind the bungalow homes above the worked terraces, stood groves of fruit trees. The shrubby, blue-leaved ones were reems, Reba pointed out. "Our very own," she said. "Wait'll you taste them."

"I have," I reminded her but was drowned out by Ben and Rike chanting, "I can hardly wait,"

As we came to the center of town we could see that everyone was on foot, except some delivery people who drove loaded electric carts along a central raised mall. There was a big impressive building taking up one side of the main square, and I thought it must be the mayor's house.

"Bluebeard's Castle," Reba announced.

"Not likely," Ben said. "What is it, really?"

On second look, it had that institutional appearance you can recognize anywhere. A formal border of shrubs lay on each side of the walk going up to the broad steps. Under one of the shrubs lay some unusual object. It was completely smooth, shiny even in the shade, and looked as if it were made of metal.

Reba gave a soft but distinctive whistle. The machinery got up on four unjointed legs and trotted toward us, and the hair rose on the nape of my neck. Its monel skull was streamlined, earless, with what looked like small vents but couldn't be nostrils. It had no tail.

"Hello, Cy," Reba said to it. It had stopped six feet from us, and we could see it had eyes, of the television type.

Rike sucked in his breath sharply. "Christ, what is it?"

"A cydog," Reba said. "There's always one on guard here. I told you, this is Bluebeard's Castle."

"Now just a minute," Ben said, sounding his most pompous. "Is there any part of that thing which is real dog?"

"The brain is real dog, Captain," Reba said. Obviously she was enjoying this encounter, with her own kind of bitter glee. "The brain is sixteen generations pure-bred guard dog. The body was

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discarded. After we imported the stock, we discovered there isn't any breed of dependable guard dog which can live and work at optimum in this climate, let alone sit outside on twenty-four hour duty and communicate with those inside. All Cy needs is a little recharge now and then and a special solution to keep the brain moist."

Ben asked, "Has it got teeth?"

"It doesn't need teeth. It carries an anesthetic needle, which we fondly call a fang." Reba turned away, the cydog went back to the shade of the shrubs, and we moved on.

"Why do you need a guard there?" I asked.

Reba shook her head. "Just in case some of those Dust Bowlers come to town, or an Earth Patty gets too nosy, or something like that."

Sweating, thirsty, stunned by the heaviness of the overheated air, we went on through town toward the hotel where we'd have to stay until the Academy building was completed. Rike finally asked the question for all of us, about what was inside the Castle.

"Medical research," Reba said. "Here's your hotel."

The cooling units were going full blast. The relief was tremendous. We sat together in the lounge, which was dim and low roofed, with walls of the lovely porous fanwood used in most of the Vogl buildings, and sipped cold fruit drinks. Then, in the space between two breaths, it grew dark and darker, the lobby lights came on, and sheets of rain fell. We sat and watched it pour, wishing it was tomorrow, wishing we could get down to work.

Although neither the sleeping quarters nor the roof drains had been completed in the Academy building, we went over there in the morning and started setting up classrooms around the computer nest. Reba, in her green Vogl Patrol uniform with the fishnet tunic, arrived early, and I deputized her as my field adjutant, which was a laugh, since she had all the field knowledge and I didn't even own a pair of bog shoes. She was cheerful today; perhaps, like the rest of us, relieved to be put to work.

"Got something for you," she said, "a little present from some of us on Vogl, for what you did at the meeting." She put the gift on my table, where it hesitated for an instant, then ran on tiny wheels up my arm to my shoulder. It was a metal mouse.

"You don't really expect me to believe there's a mouse brain inside this mechanical device?" I asked.

"Sure. There are only two of them, though. Dr. Mensy just gave mice a whirl, while she was on

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vacation. They aren't good for anything but amusement, she says."

I plucked it off my shoulder. Dr. Mensy must be a whimsical vacationer, for she had given it mousy metal ears. It had one little eye, in the middle of its nose. It had a neck joint, which permitted it to cock its head in an appealing way. I sort of liked it. "Cyclops," I said. "Do I oil it?"

"Cyborgs aren't my field. Dr. Mensy can tell you, and you'll meet her soon. Are you aware that Academy applicants are lined up in the hall about six deep?"

"Just a minute, Reba. This is an agricultural planet. There's been a lot of trouble between Vogl and Earth because you wanted a major university and a chance to do more than grow goats and beans. Now here is this mouse, and there was that dog thing, and we haven't yet produced working cyborgs on Earth. Would you like to explain anything to me?"

"Roxy, you're like all the rest of them, you don't listen when we tell you. It's been a long time since many of our kids decided they didn't have to be farmers; they could be astronomers or genetic engineers or whatever they wanted. We've smuggled as much equipment off Earth as we can, and what counts more, we've collected the best brains, right here in Davvis. The know-how. The desire to. What did you expect, Patty, a complacent bunch of farmers, sweating to feed your planet?"

"But do you know how advanced these techniques are?"

"You bet we do. You've got a thousand different opportunities, and a thousand different directions to go in. Your energies are spread pretty thin. Up here, along with plain old-fashioned survival, we've concentrated on one thing, which we know has value. Patty, you'll cry for it, you Earth people. Now how about setting up the schoolhouse?"

A Dr. Petes had been drafted to serve as Academy medic and had set up an examination center in a storeroom at the end of the hall. The applicants were a mixed group, all right; all shapes, sizes, colors, and conditions, though this seemed to be the rule. I wondered whether it was diet or climate and hoped it was the latter.

Before we started interviews, I asked Reba, "Do you think any of those Dust Bowlers would try to sign up? To make trouble or to see what's going on?"

"Not a chance, this is dirty territory, the whole town is, from their point of view. The Academy would be a wicked place. And Bluebeard's Castle is their ultimate target, the unholy of unholies."

"Are they your 'local problems,' Reba?"

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"It would be better if you came to your own conclusions," she said, as stuffily as Ben Slane at his worst.

We operated along the lines of confusion in spite of our good intentions. Papers turned soggy at a touch; the moist heat turned our brains to jelly. I did have to admire, again, the fanwood interiors and furniture, dry but resiliant, and I wished I were the same,

The people of Vogl came to peer in curiosity at our worktables and our faces; at least half of them had just turned out for the spectacle.

A boy shambled into the room, announced himself as Ally Stahr. He had green eyes and a beautiful smile, and sprawled on one of the little hard chairs, something that looked impossible to do on such a perch. Practice, I supposed.

"I can milk goats," he said, grinning at us. "I've designed computer systems, done a little surgery —"

"Surgery?" I croaked.

"Yeah, some," he said. "Lots of us learn to do some, just the basic aid stuff. I know farms as well as towns, so I ought to be of some use, and I grew up on bog shoes. I heard one of you Pattys is a telepath, is that true? We have one family of them left, but they aren't much use, so they farm."

Reba and Rike turned to look at me. "Oh, I play the nose flute," I said, with as much insouciance as I could muster.

"In our climate, the reeds warp," the boy said mercilessly.

Rike asked, "How old are you?"

"Fifteen and three quarters."

"Underage."

Reba said, "Wait, now. This is Vogl. If he's got the background and experience we can use, then we can use him."

Ben Slane puffed himself up and withheld the nice smile that made him likable. "Fifteen, indeed! There have to be some regulations."

I thought it over for about three seconds. "Captain, maybe Reba's right. Don't you think we ought to set up Vogl regulations rather than using our own? We're going to face some unknown situations here, aren't we?"

We'd found it was always a good idea to put our thoughts in the form of questions to the captain, and then he could agree with us while sounding as if he were the final authority. He now pulled his chin in toward his neck, thinking it over, giving it his profound consideration. "All right. Perhaps we can use him in some capacity. Send him along to Dr. Petes."

We went on screening applicants. What struck me most about all of them, boys, skinny young women, work-hardened older

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farmers, was a quality of tough realism. It made me feel soft, me, with my training, who'd always been proud of physical toughness and mental competence, I felt like a luxury item compared to the average citizen of Vogl. It gave me something to think about, in terms of who was going to teach what.

After we'd shut down for the morning, Reba sat herself on my desk and began to clean her fingernails. I took Cyclops out of the table drawer where he'd been put for safety. "Reba, did I thank you for this critter?"

"No, but you're welcome. I think you ought to meet Annie Mensy. She'll be interested in you."

I looked into her eyes; she met my look with no expression, which, I was learning, is how Vogl people usually look at you, unless something strikes them as funny. Beware of that laughter, I told myself.

"Why does she want to see me?" I asked. "I'm not ready to be encased in brass."

Reba laughed. "At the level of sergeant, you don't qualify." She slid off the desk. "Come on. I promised Dr. Mensy I'd bring you over."

"Okay. Where is she?"

"She's the Queen of Bluebeard's Castle."

In silence I followed her, and we were crossing the main square before Reba said, "We don't really know that you'll work out, of course."

"How come you know all about this, yet you've been away, you've been on Earth for months? I don't even know what you're talking about."

"Lieutenant Rocca had a few words with me. If you want to blame anyone for anything that happens, blame your friend Merle."

The cydog under the shrub merely lifted its head and then went back to rest again, apparently content. The door to Bluebeard's Castle was unlocked, there was no human guard, and I began to think I was being had, again.

Inside, the corridor was low roofed, cool and dim; at intervals there were opaque panels set into the walls, which I was sure transmitted all kinds of information. A door slid open, and out came a tiny, dark, fierce-looking woman. "There you are!" she cried, darting up to us. "Roxy Rimidon? Yes, of course. We've been waiting all morning for you."

Feeling edgy and disagreeable about all these mysteries, I sounded nearly as stiff-necked as Ben Slane when I spoke. "It's supposed to be my job to set up some sort of Patrol Academy."

"Yes, sweetheart, I know," Dr. Mensy said, "but we're sure you

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have other talents. Lieutenant Rocca left instructions for us to use you in some experiments. And after all, you've taken our Dr. Petes, and we can hardly spare him. Of course, darling, I'm not suggesting that was a fair trade."

"See you later," Reba said, and escaped my clutching hand.

"Do come in, Sergeant," Dr. Mensy said, beckoning me from her doorway. Inside, it was the usual green plastic environment one expects in medical centers, harsh looking after the fanwood walls and ceilings.

"Thanks for the mouse," I said, and remembered that Cyclops was in the breast pocket of my blouse. I took him out, regarded him in the eye; he cocked his head sideways and looked back smugly at me, so I put him away again.

"Oh, that was the fun one," Annie Mensy said, smiling. "No intelligence, but awfully cute. We don't usually bother with cute things around here; I was ashamed I'd spent the time on those." She sat at her desk and went through some papers, then motioned me to one of the small, hard chairs everyone on Vogl seemed to find necessary to their comfort. For a few minutes there was that silence which is composed of quiet noises; ventilators, coolers or heaters, the whispering of stiff, official papers. A voice over her desk speaker said: "Ready? Domingo is about burning off his insulation with impatience."

"No," Dr. Mensy said, not even raising her eyes from her papers. "Tell him to turn off for about ten minutes. Sergeant Rimidon is in no way prepared."

"Lots of luck," said the voice. A little sweat began to come out on my upper lip. I loved every part of me and didn't intend to give any of it up to these mad surgeons.

Dr. Mensy finally looked up at me. "Well, darling, tell me, do you know anything about adapted man?"

"Only theoretically. My God, you don't mean you've got a brass man walking around?"

Her grin was ferocious, her intensity was laserlike. "Look," she said, "a cyborg may or may not be mobile; what it has is amplified brain power, especially our immobile type which is extended, or incorporated, into a computer. Other adaptations in other cases, mechanical, electronic, and so on. You know. If you're out on bog shoes somewhere, you don't have access to a computer, but your cyborg partner does."

I swallowed. I asked, "Whatever happened to the idea of robot doubles?"

"They've been in use here and there. But the robot brain is limited as long as it's portable. Maybe

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someday it won't be, but there's work today."

"And tomorrow," I said, standing up. "Thanks, but I decline. I was sent here to teach at a Patrol Academy."

"Oh, darling, you couldn't be more mistaken," she said, and flung a set of papers across the desk to me. "Teach later, perhaps," she added. The papers were orders, signed first by General Bistrup and second by Lt. Merle Rocca; I was to cooperate in an experimental medical venture with Dr. Annie Mensy of Medical Research. At the bottom of all this official stuff, there was a note to the effect that if the experiments were completed, I was to be in charge of field work.

"Why me?" I asked, thinking to stall off the meeting with Domingo, who even now was sizzling through his insulation.

"There's some indication that those of you with biological communication powers may be more successful in this kind of partnership."

"Does Domingo have those powers too?"

"He did before adaptation, and his brain is now tremendously amplified by the link to the computer. So far, he's the only human survivor of the applications of our research. We lost the other two to brain damage during the bionic installation phase."

"Tell me, Dr. Mensy. Was Domingo willing?"

She started back and stared at me. "Willing? Sergeant, sweetheart, his body was crushed in a rock slide, his chances for survival were absolute zero."

She tapped the speaker on her desk and said, "Tell Domingo we're coming down now."

We went down the corridor, to a flight of steps. As we began to descend these steps, my skin felt crawly and hot, a part of my head began to tighten and ache, all the old systems; the warning of snake, of tracks, of danger on the right and gods on the left; and right foot down, I said: why me? and left foot down, I said: not me! I stopped short, holding onto the grab rails on both sides.

"Listen. I don't think I can do this, Dr. Mensy."

"Oh, yes, you can," she said, taking me by the arms and pulling me. "At least you can try."

Another green shiny room, this one vast. The far end was given over to a computer installation, with a video screen set into its center and a couple of stereo speakers. I had no idea where, in that mass of circuits, synapses and relays, somebody named Domingo, or the remains of him, was hiding. Out of the speakers came: "Wow. Lookit her. A brown-eyed blonde. Hook us up, Doctor."

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The voice was not the canned kind I had expected; it sounded extremely real. It had cracked part way through the comments. Dr. Mensy was rolling a padded chair with a crown of metal and wires forward toward Domingo.

"You'll get used to him," she said. "Come and sit down. Domingo, this is Sergeant Rimidon of Planet Patrol."

"Yeah, hi. Wow, hook us up. I was afraid they'd send me some mean old lady. This is my lucky day."

"Doctor, how old is Domingo?" I asked.

"About thirteen, now. He was eleven at the time of his accident. If you're wondering about his voice, we took it off tapes and reprinted it."

"Just a little nicety you thought up on vacation?" I asked, backing away from the chair she was offering me.

"Something like that," she said absently. "Sit down."

So I sat down, she wired me up, working gently. Domingo's assortment of lights, keys, stereos, screens, hummed and blinked, and at one point sang a few bars of song. Dr. Mensy lowered the metal crown to my head, and I thought what a fool I was to walk into this. It was a pattern transfer machine; they'd take everything they needed out of my head and leave me to bumble around their planet, or they'd just dispose of me in a bog, along with Ben and Rike, and set up their own Academy. Domingo was nothing but a recording; the computer they tried to pass off as a boy was just a computer; I'd walked right into it and now there was no way out.

"Okay, darling," Dr. Mensy said, just as I was going to reach up and snatch that stuff off my head.

There was a moment of panic. My stomach turned over, and every primeval fear I'd buried since childhood came to the surface writhing and leering. Then I seemed to hurtle down an interminable black funnel while something, a shape, or rather, a point of light, hurtled toward me. It struck me full on, and to keep myself from falling I grabbed it and found I was holding the thin body of a weeping boy. This is not real, I thought.

Sure it's real, Domingo thought. It's me. It's you. It's the onliest time since Mrs. Farrell left for Alpha that anybody's been able to touch me.

How can I touch what isn't there? I thought.

I'm here, Blondie. 'Touch' is in the brain, you know.

Then the physical sensations faded, and the darkness lifted gradually until I could see light shining on green tile, Dr. Annie

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Mensy in her green slacks and smock, Domingo's stereo voice boxes, my own arms, furred with soft blonde hair, my fingers, sweating, gripping the arms of the chair. Shakily, I reached up to my head, only to find it free of entanglements. Just my own head, my own blonde waves.

"Hi," Domingo's voice said through the stereo, and inside my head it said, Hi, like an echo.

"Contact?" Dr. Mensy asked.

"Too much," I said. "And now what?"

"Now, bog shoes, and out into the field you with. Domingo reads the map, gives you directional signals, you feed back what you see and hear."

"You mean right now? What if we lose contact? I never did anything like this before. I don't know how to do it."

She gave me that no-person look which I'd been getting from everyone on Vogl, and said, "Domingo knows how. Mrs. Farrel did, too, but her family transferred to Alpha. Several others have been in contact with Domingo, but they didn't get along too well."

She took me upstairs and out a side door. There was a back pack which an orderly strapped on me, a pair of bog shoes which I slung over my shoulder, and the feeling that northwest was the direction. I started walking toward the dense wall of beeky and fan trees. Though they grew only twenty feet tall, the growth was incredibly lush, and the ground covered with thin-leaved ferns, creeper, and groups of pouched flowers which looked like orchids, drops of moisture trembling on the lower lip. It wasn't that Domingo said anything inside my head; there was just the feeling that I was to go this way, curve around, push past some fallen trees, go that way.

The trees thinned out after a while and I could see, ahead of me, the pale quivery green which meant bog. I sat down and strapped on the bog shoes, remembering Lt. Nelson at the Academy who'd taught me how to use them. It seemed a long time ago.

I stood up, went forward, flapped and waddled down the squelchy slope to the bog. Half the trick of bog shoes is not slowing down for anything, keeping your pace fast and even, so that you don't even begin to sink. If your feet were circular, about twenty-four inches in diameter, and well webbed, and if you had learned from birth how to balance on these feet, you could cross a Vogl bog fairly well.

I wanted to head up the slope directly in front of me, but I was definitely being guided to my right. I cautiously increased my speed as I felt the surface quaking and giving

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under me. Slap, slop, slap; wet mud or muddy water, whichever it was, splashed up around me. Legend has it that Vogl children cross bogs in absolute silence, but I knew it to be a lie.

Among the branches of the trees, some beautiful winged lizards glided and crossed over, but I couldn't afford more than a glance at them. I was ordered to keep moving.

I'd just made it to the edge of the bog when I stubbed one shoe, and over I went, splash, splop, grabbing at solid ground with thumbs, wrists, forearms. I managed to drag myself up to safety.

Clod, Domingo said.

I'm not used to this, I said in self-defense.

Yes, you are. You're mobile.

I'm not mobile on bog shoes.

Clod. Lump. Blonde barge.

Domingo? We're supposed to work together.

Stupid. I don't need you. You need me.

And he vanished out of my head. I sat there, holding the dripping bog shoes in one hand, no idea of where I was, where I should go, or how to get back.

So I got up and went forward, on the principle that if I'd been sent out in this direction, there was somewhere to go.

Where I went was one of those open, grassy glades, with a group of Dust Bowlers sitting around, evidently finishing one of their ceremonies. I came upon them so suddenly I had no chance to be quiet or careful, or even polite; I just tumbled into their midst, and I kicked over a ritual bowl of dust while I was at it.

They formed an extremely hostile looking group. My Patrol uniform had turned brown with mud and green with slime, but it was recognizable even so.

"Get out of here," one of them said.

"Gladly. Can you show me the way?"

"You mean you're lost?" another one said.

They began to laugh. They began to move in a circle around me, with nasty laughter and shuffling feet. One of them picked up the bowl I'd knocked over and threw it at me. It glanced off my shoulder.

Domingo!

"A real-life Patty," someone said.

"Let's put her back in the bog."

"We don't need to, let's just leave her here."

"That's no fun. Let's run her through the woods."

A clump of mud, with some roots attached, struck me on the cheek. One of them said, "She can't interfere with us now, it's far too late."

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Domingo? I need you.

That's right, Domingo said, you need me. What have you got in your pockets?

Cyclops had ridden out the journey in my blouse pocket; so on the off chance that Domingo knew what he was doing, I took Cyclops out and held him in the palm of my hand. The group voiced revulsion, fear and hate.

"Evil. Corrupt. Stinking. Vile. Unholy." They chanted a long list.

Cyclops glinted brassily in the palm of my hand. In my head, Domingo said: don't move, partner, just stand there and drip mud. I wasn't sure if that was designed to help me or mock me.

"Why is it evil?" I asked the young woman who seemed to be in charge of the group.

"It isn't human. It isn't Godly."

Whatever they felt about the mouse and me, they were breaking up as a group. One of them began to collect the ritual bowls from the ground, a couple more had turned and gone away among the trees. Muttering and shuffling, glancing back over their shoulder at Cyclops, they began to leave. The young woman looked back and said, "No matter what you do, you're too late to stop us."

"Stop what?"

But of course there was no answer. So I thought: Domingo, I'd like to get back pretty soon.

I bet you would.

Come on, partner.

Going to have a hot bath, Blondie? A cold drink? A big meal? A lover? A dance? A ball game?

Would you rather be dead? I asked him.

Sometimes.

I wouldn't.

Gotcha, Domingo said. Never let you go. Hooked on forever. Too bad you're female, though. My eyes, my ears, my stomach, my feet, but never my balls.

Which way home?

I turned around and followed crushed leaves and bent branches as well as I could, but this was the kind of forest where any human mark seemed to vanish almost instantly. My muscles ached from the strange terrain; my head hurt, too, probably not through any fault of Domingo's. The partnership certainly seemed a failure, though I could understand why the others hadn't gotten along with him. Some kid, Domingo.

Now I had to put on the bog shoes again and go back. The second time was a little better, though I was tired. It wasn't just the wet heat, but listening for Domingo was a new kind of thing for me, and trying to handle him mentally while I handled myself physically was exhausting.

My vision was badly blurred by

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the time I broke out of the forest and could look down toward the big building I'd left a few hours before. If I didn't make it, I could just fall down right here and go to sleep. But I did make it. Dumped the back pack, which I'd never even opened, on the step, along with the bog shoes. I opened the door and stalked in, trying to look strong and official. Rike was down at the end of the corridor talking with Dr. Mensy.

"I want to be unhooked from Domingo," I said.

Dr. Mensy pursed her lips. "Difficulties?"

"Insurmountable."

"I don't believe it. Go and have some dinner and come back tomorrow."

"Come on," Rike said, and took my arm. "I'll buy you a drink, you look like you need it. You're not supposed to swim in the bogs, just scurry across them lightly."

"Oh, you try it," I said.

We sat in the hotel lounge with the lovely magic of tall cold drinks while I told him as well as I could what the day had been like. I don't know what I expected from him; sympathy, perhaps. Friendship, surely. He listened with his lids drooping sleepily over his eyes.

"Rough day," he said at last.

"There'll be more of them," I said in the same tone of voice. When I looked from the corner of my eyes to see what he was doing, he was looking at me from the corner of his eyes. Then he glanced at his watch.

"Got an appointment?" I asked.

"No. But we're still on duty, officially. Another half hour."

"That's ridiculous."

"Sure," he said. He smiled. We both lounged a little squirmier in our chairs, turning slightly until our knees pointed at each other.

After a moment I said, "I don't even remember how long the day is here. Or when sunset comes."

"At this time of year, about eight o'clock, I think." Rike set his empty glass down. "What's the difference, anyway?"

"I was just asking."

"Why, you want to keep the lights on?"

I set my empty glass down. "I don't like this conversation," I said. "Are we waiting to go off duty for dinner, or do we have a different reason, or are you struggling with some terrible secret agony?"

Rike picked up his empty glass and found enough in the bottom of it to occupy his attention.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Okay, Roxy. You asked for it. I'm sitting here in secret agony, as you so crudely put it, because the minute we're off duty I'd love to rush you to my room and roll all over the floor with you, but I can't

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stand the idea of anybody poking around in my mind the way you're alleged to be able to do."

"How do you know it would be any worse than having somebody poking around in your body?"

He started to reply and strangled; waves of purple and red swept up his neck through his face. I didn't know whether I was sorrier for me or for him, but I thought it was for me, and I got up briskly and said, "Thanks for the drink." I walked off with what I hoped was a calm face and collected stride.

I hated the planet Vogl and everything to do with it, especially me. When I got to my room, I picked up a fanwood chair and smashed it into splinters. I hated fanwood. Also, Domingo, Dr. Mensy, Lt. Merle Rocca, bog shoes, computers, cyborgs, Planet Patrol, life, death, sex and dinner. I'd been crazy about Riker Paisley ever since we met a month ago, but I hated him, too.

In the morning when I got up, hungry and angry, I had some breakfast and swept out the anger. A member of Planet Patrol does not have personal problems while on duty. Or so I'd been taught. I arrived on time at the Academy, to be greeted by Captain Ben Slane. "Morning, Sergeant. You're supposed to go over to Bluebeard's again today."

I noticed how easily we'd all come to call it Bluebeard's Castle. "Listen, Ben, the experiment was a real flop, and I really don't want to go through it again."

He looked at me in amazement. "Sergeant Rimidon, I just gave you an order."

"Yes, sir," I said, spun on my heel, and went out. We'd been slopping along comfortably as friends since we arrived, to the degree that I'd forgotten he was my superior, forgotten I was to take orders. In other words, my brain had begun to rot the moment I set foot on this disgusting planet. I could have stayed home and been killed or maimed in any number of conventional ways, and probably my mother would have received my posthumous citation for bravery, intelligence, dedication to duty, and venery.

"Good morning, ma'am," I said to Dr. Mensy when I got to her office.

"Hello, Sergeant zarling," she said. "I understand that Domingo treated you very badly. He said he was sorry."

"That was very nice of him," I replied.

She glared up along her small nose at me. "Don't take that tone. Did you expect him to behave like a regular little school boy?"

"No, I didn't. But you said the few others were unable to get along with him."

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"They were just ordinary, undisciplined citizens. I'd hoped for better from someone with your background. I would like to link you up again."

"You mean we're unhooked? It wears off?"

"When we link you with Domingo, we try to parallel both brain patterns, at least in some areas, to some degree. Of course we use Domingo's pattern, rather than yours, as a base. If we were to repeat this parallel patterning daily, over a period of time, probably your personality would become subordinate to his. I'm not sure that would be desirable. We're not at liberty to try it, anyhow, especially with Patrol personnel. The contact wears off after five or six hours, if it isn't repeated daily. Do you understand?"

"Clearly," I snarled.

"Then let's go downstairs and see if we can't work out a little cooperation between the two of you. Enough to see if this immobile cyborg-mobile field officer has the value we think it has."

She'd no sooner opened the door to Domingo's room than his speakers shouted: "Hi, Blondie, wow, have you got some temper; you're really smashing."

"You snoopy little bastard," I said clearly.

The speakers gave a raucous laugh, and Dr. Mensy looked angry. "He's just a child," she said.

"No, he isn't," I protested, and Domingo said, "You tell her; I been trying to tell her for a long time now. She thinks I'm a thirteen-year-old boy."

"Well, if you're not, what are you, inside all that gear:" the doctor asked.

"I'm a highly sophisticated thinking machine, and you're gonna hook me up to a highly sophisticated feeling machine, and together we're gonna dry up those old Dust Bowlers who want to turn the clock back, the machines off, and generally foul up progress for the rest of us. Besides, they don't believe in me."

"Some speech," I said.

"Yeah, I'm pretty good, huh? Come on, Blondie, sit down in the chair. Hook up and be my feelie."

"Okay. We'll hook up and you be my thinkie."

"Oh, dear Lord," Dr. Mensy exclaimed, "I will never understand the layman's mentality. This isn't some sort of joke."

"Yes, it is," Domingo and I said together. This tone of lightheartedness might be just the right one to take, the right way to keep Domingo working clearly and at his best without emotional interference.

This time I went down through the darkness with moderate speed, without the panic; this time,

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Domingo didn't hurl himself weeping into my arms. We shook hands, kissed each other on both cheeks, and were committed to a partnership. Or so I hoped.

Do those Dust Bowlers have any headquarters?

Sure, out on the farms. Cross that bog you fell into yesterday, northeast two miles, you'll find them. Get going, clumsy.

You can call me Roxy.

Sure, Blondie.

Roxy.

Dumbhead.

This time I made it across the bog without falling. The glade was empty; only a small pile of nearly vanished dust showed where the group had met before. I followed Domingo's guidance through the forest for a long time, until I came to an area where small farms showed in the open distance.

The houses were built up on stilts to keep from fungus and rot. Each had its own vegetable patch, some goats tethered out, and the tilapia pools which seemed to be communally operated. The place was deserted, though. The heat was terrific, and my feet were shaking. No they weren't, the ground was.

I hurried up the slope toward the house, and when a real tremor occurred, I stopped and looked back. Down by the bog, a black mouth opened, grinned, and closed.

Domingo!

Oh, sit down and shut up. We have these little quakes all the time. If you're on high ground, you're okay. I can see the place is empty, maybe they're having a mass ceremony some where. Why don't you sit there and look around so I can see the view?

The tremors recurred several times, and then the area stabilized and became quiet. I went on sitting there because this odd feeling was happening; part of it was familiar, the tightening of my skin, the aching in my brain, the warning; part of it was strange, some kind of interference.

Domingo, quit messing around in my head.

I wasn't. I wasn't anywhere near you. What's happening?

Something not good.

Oh, go on, feelie, you imagine things. Like yesterday. You imagined you and that Lieutenant Paisley —

Total silence, just as if someone had clapped a hand over Domingo's mouth. I stood up, began to retrace my steps away from the farms, down to the forest and bogs. My head felt like it was being divided into separate pieces so I could hardly think.

Blondie! Domingo almost split my brain in two.

Trouble?

They're coming here. More

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than two hundred of them. They're coming to the Castle with sticks and stones, and I'm scared.

Call somebody.

I can't call anybody but you. I'm not linked to anybody but you. If Dr. Mensy isn't with me, even she can't hear me.

Okay, hold on. I'm coming in.

I tore into the forest at top speed, but as soon as I hit that wet, densely overgrown forest floor, I had to slow down. The bog shoes over my shoulder caught on branches, and I yanked them loose. If two hundred Dust Bowlers were heading into town, there must be people who saw them coming. I couldn't imagine a pitched battle in the streets of Davvis; not in any streets, for that matter, because we didn't have such things at home. But I wasn't at home; I was on a raw young planet in a comparatively primitive society, and I'd had nothing but surprises since I arrived, and so I'd better be ready for a few more.

One of my feet caught in a clump of creeper, and I sprawled hard on the ground, rose up spitting, saw the glint of Cyclops as he fell and vanished, but couldn't stop to retrieve him.

Clumsy clod, I said to myself.

Hanging onto the bog shoes for dear life, I booted and batted my way through the steamy undergrowth toward the last stretch of bog. Before I reached it, something stood in my way. It was about twenty feet tall at the head, which was small, and poised on a long scaly neck. The jaws were peacefully chomping some particular thin, long leaves from a certain kind of tree.

It must have heard or smelled me, for it turned its head, and the little glittering eyes looked me through and through. I stopped breathing. I became as invisible as possible. Domingo kept saying: hurry up, hurry up, they're coming to get me. But I didn't dare blink an eyelid.

After a few moments the reptile began to feed again, slowly chomping on the leaves, a few shreds and fibers dribbling down from its mouth. I felt sure the people in the town could handle any mob coming in, but that did nothing to relieve my passion to get back there and help.

The reptile began to plod toward me, evidently looking for more of his special food. I went backward, a step at a time, not sure of what I was stepping into. I ducked sideways and began to creep off a different way, figuring I could enter and cross the bog from another direction.

With a tremendous trampling rush, the damn thing came at me, knocked me flat, stepped on me and kept going. Everything hurt,

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my back, my neck, my knees, though nothing seemed to be broken.

When I tried to get up, I fell over; so I lay there for a while collecting myself. Next try, I made it to my knees. Just bruises. Flailing around, hunting for the bog shoes, I spent a lot of time getting nowhere. Then I hobbled and hopped the rest of the way down to the bog, strapped on the shoes, and started across. I fell twice on the way; the second time it took me so long to get myself upright that I nearly was pulled under. There was no message from Domingo, nothing. Five hours had gone by; the link was wearing thin, perhaps it had gone completely, and he was trying to speak to me but I couldn't hear. I finished the water in my canteen and got myself in motion.

Before I reached the edge of the forest, I smelled smoke, a dirty chemical smell as if all kinds of things were burning. Some Academy we're going to have, I thought furiously, crashing through toward the thin edge of the trees. Can't even control a small group, how we going to teach them to control themselves? And how could anything in this place burn? But then I remembered the fanwood chair I'd smashed, delicate and brittle. Most of the houeses were made of fanwood, it never rotted, it dried rapidly after being wet. Bluebeard's Castle, like the other buildings, was constructed mainly of fanwood.

There was battle in the streets, all right; many houses were giving off a dirty, brown smoke; people sat holding bloody heads or crawled around on their hands and knees looking for friends. Dust Bowlers were indistinguishable from other Vogl people, to me. What I did notice was how many people stood on the sidelines, staring at the melee, unwilling or unable to join in. They seemed to be in shock.

At the sideway in to Bluebeard's I knocked down a couple of people and thrust a few others aside. The minute I entered the building I began to cough and choke, though quenchers were being sprayed on the smoking walls. What little there was of air was vile. I headed for Dr. Mensy's office, but the hall was full of people screaming, hitting each other and stamping on those who had fallen.

Where was that damn door?

There was no answer, not in my head or aloud; so I had to find a door myself and hope it was the right one. Down the dark stairs, holding onto the grabrails, across a slippery, smoky area, to Domingo's room. The lights were on. The video screen and speakers were smashed, wires hung loose, smoke dribbled up from one end of the computer, panels had been torn off, bent, smashed; it was hard to believe so

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much damage could have been done.

I rolled the padded chair over, wondering if I could hook myself in and if there was anyone left to link to, but people had followed me down the stairs, and now they burst into the room shouting and fighting. I was flattened back against the wall, unable to move; the chair was knocked over and took several people with it.

Then a couple of men in green Vogl Patrol uniforms, and a doctor with his tunic shredded and bloody, came to the door and fired gas guns into the room. People toppled in waves which reached to me, my head caught fire, then my lungs, and my nose turned into a pillow as I passed out.

"Rimidon. Come on, Rimidon. On your feet!" A voice repeated this over and over as I came up through layers of unconsciousness, my eyes burning and my nose purged by that damn gas. It was Rike, leaning over me, calling me back to work. I reached out and tried to push him away.

"Come on, Sergeant," he repeated. "Up and at 'em."

"Nobody left," I mumbled.

"Sure, plenty left. Got to start school tomorrow."

I got my eyes open. Rike's long face hung in the air like a gloomy planet above me. "Hotel room?" I asked.

"Yeah, you been out a while. We hauled you up here to give you some rest."

"What about Domingo?"

"I don't know."

"Everything under control?"

"You bet," Rike said. "They're just gluing the busted heads together. You hungry?"

"No."

"Okay. See you later." He turned around and crossed toward the door.

"Rike?"

"Yeah?"

"The only time I ever read anybody's mind was when Dr. Mensy hooked me up to Domingo. Before that all I ever got was general feelings, like something's happened over there, or, it isn't safe here. I never read anybody's mind, more than people normally do."

"Oh, sure," Rike said, but he came back and sat down on the edge of the bed. With one hand he pushed the hair back from my face. "You're bruised," he said.

"I fell. They're not even battle bruises."

"Sure they are," he said. "You want a citation or something? The sun must have got you." He patted my arm. "Rest up, I'll see you later on."

I lay there, thinking confused thoughts about Vogl; the farm communities, the Dust Bowl chanters, and the incredibly

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sophisticated cyborgs. As Reba had said, at home we were working on a thousand different things, here they'd concentrated on one. And maybe they'd done it not just because they could use this particular item, but because it meant they had something to show us, something beside reems and beans, which we would want. It made sense.

How's Domingo? I asked the air, but the air didn't answer.

After a while, I washed my face, put my cap on straight, and limped downstairs to the lobby. It was full of people talking, having drinks. Some of them were bandaged; lots of them were more bruised and shaken than I. Rike and Ben were over in a corner of the lounge. They called to me, and I went to them and said, "I have to go right over to Dr.Mensy; I want to know what's happened over there."

Rike pulled me down onto the seat beside him. "Have a drink first, Roxy. I don't even know if you can get into that building."

"Sort of a direct hit, was it?" I asked.

Ben and Rike exchanged glances.

"Domingo's dead, isn't he? What was left of him, I mean."

"Well, they went straight for him," Rike said. "Here's your drink."

I reached out blindly for it, my eyes stinging. I took a big swallow, and scrubbed my eyes with my knuckles. "Damn gas guns," I said.

"Gas guns, hell," Rike said, putting an arm around me.

We spent a few minutes in reflective silence, sipping our drinks. Then Reba pushed her way through the chattering crowd toward us. Her face was smudged with soot and there was a gash across one cheekbone. A ragged bandage was wrapped around her left wrist. "Well," she said, as she plopped down next to Ben. "Bet you never expected a civil war."

"Is that what you call it?" I asked.

"No. Just a small local problem."

"Is there any good news?"

Reba smiled at me. "Sure there is. We never let them touch the Academy building, it's in fine shape. Start classes there tomorrow."

"What about the Castle?" Ben asked.

"It's a shambles. Dr. Mensy's running around like crazy trying to patch it up and crying over Domingo and giving orders three at a time." She glanced at me, and away. "One of the cydogs was broken in pieces, but the other's okay. It keeps patrolling the corridor, and everybody falls over it, and it anesthetized Dr. Brand by mistake."

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"I'm glad you find something amusing in the day's action," I said. "I even lost Cyclops."

"Last time, the whole town was burned."

The three of us turned on her. "And you never said anything about that?" we demanded.

"I wouldn't want you to come up here with any preconceptions. The town's been burned over at least three times by various factions. Why do you think we've been demanding a Planet Patrol of our own?"

Rike stood up and took my hand. "Come on, Roxy," he said. "Let's get out of here."

"Wait a minute, Rike," I said, hanging back.

"Now what?"

"I'm starving!"

Reba tugged at Rike's sleeve, and when he looked down at her, she said, "The hotel has room service. Why don't you have dinner sent up?"

"By God, that's the best suggestion to come from Vogl in a long time; I had no idea you were so civilized."

"Steak?" I wondered, as we closed the door of my room.

"Reem wine and orchid salad?" Rike added.

He called the dining room, listened with a sad look, sighed, and said, "All right." He had stretched his legs out in front of him, and I saw that he'd learned to sprawl, Vogl fashion, on one of those little chairs. "Goat roast, bog beans, and custard," he said. "And what's more, they can't send it up for at least an hour, because of the unexpected crowd."

I kicked off my boots. "Too bad," I said.

"Yeah, we'll have to wait." He had moved over to the bed, already had his boots off, and was taking off his shirt, when he paused, and looked at me in alarm. "Roxy, are you all right? Are you still weak from the gas?"

"Weak? Oh, Rike, I'm faint," I said, and dove at him, landing so hard his breath whooshed out with a grunt as I hit his chest and he fell over backward across the bed.

"My God, Roxy, what are you like after a nourishing meal?"

"You'll have a chance to find out, after the goat roast," I promised. "Before, and after, so you can compare."

My first stop in the morning on the way to the Academy was at the wreckage of Bluebeard's Castle, which I swore I'd start calling Medical Research this very day. Workmen were busy, hauling in prefab walls of fanwood. The remaining cydog was sitting on the top step in exactly the position an alert dog takes. If it had a tail, surely it would have wagged at me as I passed.

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The central corridor was full of rubble. Down at the far end Dr. Brand came out of a room, and I called to him, "Is Dr. Mensy here?"

"Busy," he said, and was going off, but I ran after him.

Just then, the door at the top of the stairway opened, and Dr. Mensy looked out, saying, "Brand? Has that body been disposed of yet?" Then she saw me. "Oh, hello, sweetheart," she said, red-eyed and intense. "We lost the boy."

"I know. I came by to say how sorry I am."

"Not half as sorry as we are. But we salvaged a lot of the bionic system, and we have a new —" she broke off as an orderly came down the corridor wheeling a cart. My first thought was that he was bringing dinner. There was a metal tray on the cart and, covering the tray, one of those big metal helmets they use in fancy restaurants to keep the food warm. But this cover had icy moisture condensed on it.

"Alas, poor Dust Bowler," Dr. Brand said.

"Don't start with sarcasm," Annie Mensy warned him. "We'll have enough trouble trying to seal it into place and bring her to, without you reminding her of what she was."

They had forgotten me; so after I'd seen them slide the cart onto a pair of tracks going down the stairway to what used to be Domingo's room, I turned and went back. The roof of the building gapped open in several places, letting cooled air out and the hot, steamy air in. I hoped the downstairs room was tight, or the engineers would stifle before they got that brain connected. The cydog was now resting under some shrubs outside.

"You're late," Capt. Ben Slane said when I arrived. "Your first class is waiting. Third door to the right. And good luck, Sergeant." He had already picked up and assimilated that Vogl expression of blankness which I detested.

Third door to the right, maybe half a dozen students waiting to see me show off my stuff, if I could remember a single thing. I opened the door. They were sitting in chairs, lounging on the floor, leaning against the walls, more than twenty of them, all shapes, sizes, colors, all wearing that "I don't know you" look. Ally Stahr sat in front, wearing boots with holes in them and a fishnet vest.

Somebody had taken away the chair I was supposed to use, and so I sat up on the table, wishing I could trade in my boots for bare feet, because the cooling system wasn't in operation yet.

"Today," I said, "we're going to learn how to handle a mob."

My mob broke into approving grins.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 5

We asked for Feghoots in competition 5 in the April issue, and we got them, lots of them. We edit the magazine from a rural New England village, and the Feghoots began arriving in the Spring, along with the clouds of gnats for which our town is infamous. Outside, the gnats swarmed; inside, the Feghoots rustled impatiently. When the Feghoots began to clearly outnumber the gnats, we realized that we had bitten off more than we could choose and asked Feghoot's creator, Grendel Briarton, if he would consent to pick the winners. Mr. Briarton agreed, and we can announce with relief that there will be a September issue of F&SF.

In order to protect the copyright of Ferdinand Feghoot, which is the literary property of Grendel Briarton, the winning entries have been revised by Mr. Briarton and published under his byline, with conspicuous credit (plus prizes) to the winners.

The Complete Feghoot, a new collection of Feghoots with a foreword by Poul Anderson, is scheduled to be published soon by The Mirage Press, 5111 Liberty Heights Ave., Baltimore, Maryland 21207.

FIRST PRIZE

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot

by GRENDEL BRIARTON (with thanks to THOMAS C. GUTHEIL, M.D.)

When the Galactic Senate announced, in 2366, that all planets would vote on whether or not to abandon the silver standard, no one was as alarmed as W.J. Bryan Rothschild of New Comstock, a world known as the financial hub of the universe. He at once summoned Ferdinand Feghoot.

"Please save me!" he wept. "My financial empire is based entirely on silver. If we go over to gold, I — who have arranged half the loans in the Galaxy — will be ruined. My signature will never again appear on writ, contract, or even promissory note! Never will I have another occasion to write it. Oh, Ferdinand, it is too terrible to contemplate!"

Feghoot agreed to assist him, and he spent weeks making speeches, writing articles, lobbying, and touring the back-planets. At the last moment, he returned to watch the results in Rothschild's company. They left no doubt as to his effectiveness. Gold was defeated by fourteen to one.

"*Saved!*" shouted Rothschild, hastily scribbling a check in six figures. "Feghoot, I can hardly believe it — you have triumphed once more!"

"Hi-yo!" replied Feghoot as he took his departure. "This silver ballot means that the Loan Arranger writes again!"

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SECOND PRIZE

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot

by GRENDEL BRIARTON (with thanks to WILLIAM DAVID BROXON)

The planet Gutenberg, a haven for bibliophiles, was soon taken over by unscrupulous rare book dealers, who passed corrupt laws to trap unwary collectors; and in 2203, Ferdinand Feghoot and his friend Andrew Sterling almost fell victim to these. Suddenly there were told that, their visas having expired, they would never be permitted to leave.

"*How*ever," leered the official, "I collect inscribed first editions of great English poets. If each of you happened to have —?"

Feghoot drew his despairing companion away. "I have a fake *Prometheus Unbound*, so good that no one can tell it from a real first. Now you hurry off and buy something locally."

"But he — he said *inscribed.*"

"Meet me at the Convent of St. Thomas the Wise* as soon as you can," Feghoot said. "Sister Angelica will take care of it."

At the Convent, he explained to the Sister, who was their greatest calligrapher. He donated generously to their Library Fund, and finally she agreed to furnish the needed inscriptions.

Scarcely had she begun than there was a wild beating on the door. Feghoot opened it. Sterling, excitedly waving a copy of Byron's *Don Juan*, demanded to see Sister Angelica instantly.

Feghoot restrained him. "Wait till the nun signs Shelley!"

**Thomas James Wise* [*1859-1937*], *canonized 2127 on the authority of his biography,* Forging Ahead, *by Wilfred Partington.*

RUNNERS-UP

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot

by GRENDEL BRIARTON (with thanks to PAUL MAJOR)

At the end of the Missourian Momarchy, when its Women's Lib origins were forgotten and it had fallen under the absolute dictatorship of Supermom, Ferdinand Feghoot faced one of his most dangerous decisions. Supermom (actually Hattie Lou Schultz) had been fertile, producing eighteen healthy babies, most of whom Feghoot had sired. However, none had been girls, and her power was imperilled — for her younger sister, Buzzie Bee, had had female children, and if Supermom failed in what the midwives agreed had to be her last effort, she would depose her immediately.

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Finally, with due ceremony, Hattie Lou gave birth to one more hearty infant. Only the midwives (sworn to secrecy) and its father were allowed to behold it until its sex was announced and it had been appropriately garbed. There stood Feghoot, wearing a large medal saying *Pop*. There was Supermom, with her guards, and her ambitious sister with hers; and he remembered vividly the punishments promised him by his consort — for the child, gurgling in its carefully screened crib, was only too obviously male.

Feghoot thought for only a moment. Then he smiled. "It is my opinion," he announced, "that the good of the state and my personal well-being will be best served if I just skirt the issue."

Through Time and Space With Ferdinand Feghoot

by GRENDEL BRIARTON (with thanks to F.M. BUSBY)

Ferdinand Feghoot sadly reported the fate of the Reverend Elmo Milldrip to the Peoria Society for the Conversion of Cannibals.

"I told him the Ngusa were utterly unredeemable, but he just wouldn't listen. God had sent him an infallible ally — John, Lord Greystoke, better known as Tarzan of the Apes, who of course was a real person, very impressive in his lion-skin loincloth. 'Mr. Feghoot,' he told me indignantly, when I tried to dissuade them, 'I am still Lord of the Jungle!'

"Swinging from tree to tree, the three of us reached the Ngusi capital where, behind its thorn *boma*, the natives were preparing a feast; and Greystoke, seizing a vine, uttered the bloodcurdling battle-cry of the Great Apes and launched himself over their heads. Unhappily, he had put on weight in retirement and the vine broke in mid-air. Before our horrified eyes, the cannibals slew him, converted most of him into stew, and dried his intestines, with which they restrung a primitive musical instrument. After the ghastly banquet, their Chief started playing it. He played on and on, and poor Brother Milldrip seemed to be hypnotized. He refused to make his escape, and finally I was forced to abandon him there."

"But why wouldn't he leave?" asked the Chairman.

"He was not only pious," replied Ferdinand Feghoot. "He was also a patriot. He must have believed that the Chief meant to play the Tarzan's tripes forever."

COMPETITION 6

Suggested by Roger Klorese

Numbed by the Feghoot episode, we turned gratefully to a letter from Roger Klorese, who suggests that competitors submit bawdy limericks relating to sf novels or short stories. For example: (*please turn to page 56*)

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